

Formalin: A Banned Preservative

What is the issue?

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- Fish laced with formalin has flooded the markets across states.
- This is creating a massive health scare and the Goa government has recently banned fish supplies from other states temporarily.

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Why did Goa ban fish from other states?

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- Due to fears of alleged formalin contamination, officials of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) inspected fish markets in Goa.
- They picked up various fish samples from various states for testing and had confirmed traces of formalin, which is a banned preservative.
- The episode caused a scare, which prompted the Goa government to announce a 15 day ban on entry of fish from other states.
- Border checks have also been established to inspect trucks for fish.

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What is formalin?

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- Formalin is a form of hydrated formaldehyde, which is used as a preservative in museums to ensure the specimens doesn't decompose.
- It is also used to harden human tissue for post mortem examinations.

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- It can cause gastric irritation and it also speculated to be carcinogenic, and thereby not fit for human consumption even in minimalistic proportions.
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- Notably, even in laboratories, only diluted formalin is said to be used.
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- Some amount of formalin is naturally formed while fish is transported with ice, but these are usually bound with tissues and not a risk.
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- Contrastingly, if fish is laced externally with formalin (to prolong shelf-life), it remains free and can cause serious health issue.
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Where else was formalin detected in fish?

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- The first reports of formalin-laced fish came from Kerala, a state that consumes around 10,000 tonnes of fish every day.
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- Some consumers raised the issue that the fish didn't smell and didn't decompose even when placed outside the fridge for as long as two days.
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- Subsequently, Kerala government has been carrying out a storm of raids under its fish safety and hygiene campaign "Operation Sagar Rani".
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- Inspections led to the seizure of about 9,600 kg of contaminated fish in Kollam district and about 6,000 Kg of fish in Palakkad district.
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- Notably, Tamil Nadu officials have also been carrying out raids for the last two weeks, but laboratory tests have so far returned negative for formalin.
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Where is the formalin contamination originating from?

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- Andhra Pradesh has around 4,000 hectares of aqua-culture farms, whose output peaks during the monsoon season (when coastal fishing is banned).
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- To meet the market demand, cultured fish from Andhra is to be transported widely, with sufficient quantity of ice for retarding degradation.
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- But as distances are large, the fish nonetheless tends to get spoilt in transport.
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- This has led Andhra fish suppliers to lace fish with formalin, which retards degradation to more than 10 times its natural rate.
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- Notably, even a state as far as Assam found that formalin laced fish from Andhra was reaching its market (Assam has also banned outside fish now).
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- Also, Data from across the southern states indicates that it is the fish sourced from Andhra that is the most likely to be contaminated with formalin.
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What is the way ahead?

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- **Technology** - Kochi-based “Central Institute of Fisheries Technology” (CIFT) had earlier developed a detection kit for easy detection of formalin.
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- This has proven really effective presently and is being widely used now.
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- **Inspections** - Regular inspections, testing and seizures from the markets would help in reducing this malpractice.
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- Some states have sent official communication to Andhra Pradesh regarding the same, and which now needs to crackdown on unscrupulous suppliers.
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- **Infrastructure** - The most common reason for “dishonest traders” using formalin is the unavailability of good quality ice at harvest centres.
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- Inadequate insulation during domestic transport and lack of warehousing facility for bulk storage of fish are also additional reasons for formalin lacing.
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Source: Indian Express

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