

## FAQs about the trendy drink *Bubble Tea*

BfR FAQs, 10 October 2012

*Bubble Tea* is a trendy drink which is popular especially among children and adolescents. The colourful beverage consists of green or black tea which is mixed with milk and fruit syrup. As a special feature, the drink contains little balls made of starch some of which are filled with a sweet liquid. *Bubble Tea* is served with a wide straw through which the *Bubbles* are sucked up.

The Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) is often asked whether the consumption of *Bubble Tea* poses any health risks. Below, the BfR has answered questions on the trendy drink *Bubble Tea*.

### **What is *Bubble Tea*?**

*Bubble Tea* consists of sweetened green or black tea to which milk and fruit syrup is added. As a special feature, the drink contains little balls (bubbles) made of starch. Some of these balls are filled with a sweet liquid. The *bubbles*, which are sucked up with a straw, are roughly 10 to 15 mm in diameter.

### **Does the consumption of *Bubble Tea* pose a health risk?**

When drinking *Bubble Tea*, starch balls can accidentally get into the lungs. When foreign bodies enter the lungs, this is called "aspiration". Aspiration poses a hazard for children up to the age of four in particular.

Different factors facilitate such aspiration accidents. They include sucking with a straw, because as a result of the negative pressure generated in the pharynx, the epiglottis can be lifted. This means that the epiglottis, which is normally closed during swallowing, is opened and liquids or solids can easily get into the lungs. In addition, it is known that children up to the age of four in particular are at risk to aspirate foreign objects roughly in the size of peanuts. The balls used in *Bubble Tea* are of a similar size.

### **Are there known cases where children have aspirated *Bubbles*?**

So far, no aspiration accidents have been reported to the BfR following consumption of *Bubble Tea*. In the estimation of the institute, however, such accidents are foreseeable, especially for children up to the age of four. Reports in the press about the first emergencies could not be verified by the BfR on the base on intensive inquiries.

### **Are consumers made aware of the danger that small children may aspirate *Bubbles*?**

From the viewpoint of the BfR, *Bubble Tea* should carry clear labels saying that small children up to the age of four may aspirate *Bubbles*.

### **Is *Bubble Tea* safe for older children?**

The hazard of children getting *Bubbles* into their lungs is especially great for children up to the age of four. Due to past experience with foreign bodies that are comparable to bubbles, the aspiration hazard is regarded as lower for older children and adults.

### **Should small children refrain from consuming *Bubble Tea*?**

Since the aspiration hazard seems to apply to children under four in particular, children up to that age should to the greatest possible extent refrain from drinking *Bubble Tea* altogether. If

they have *Bubble Tea* nevertheless, they should drink it without a straw, because sucking with a straw increases the likelihood of aspiration accidents.

**What is to be done, if small children accidentally aspirate *Bubbles*?**

If a small child exhibits prolonged coughing or difficulty in breathing following the consumption of *Bubble Tea*, it is imperative that the child should see a doctor.

**How many calories does *Bubble Tea* contain?**

A cup of *Bubble Tea* can contain up to 500 calories. That amounts to roughly half of the daily energy needs of a four-year-old child or one third of daily energy needs of a seven-year-old child.

**Are colour and other food additives contained in *Bubble Tea* problematic from a health viewpoint?**

Food additives, for example, colourants, must only be used in foods if they have gone through an approval procedure. Only approved additives may be used. The European Approval Authorities (the European Commission in cooperation with the EU member states), only give approval, if the use of the substance in food is safe from the health point of view. Foods must state the additives they contain. For goods that are sold loose, consumers must be informed of the used additives, for example by means of notices.