

Korean Food Regulator Cracks the Whip

29 May 2026 | News

South Korea's Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (MFDS) has launched a multi-pronged crackdown on contactless and online food sales, as well as unfair online advertising practices. The rapid growth of online grocery and food delivery services has compelled authorities to act due to increasing concerns about food safety and misleading information. One of the most popular trends in South Korea is "dawn delivery," a system in which groceries are processed overnight and delivered to households early in the morning so that they are available at dawn.



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However, the MFDS has found that this system has created new food safety risks. Several grocery items are highly perishable and can spoil if they are not refrigerated promptly. Consequently, the MFDS has introduced stricter rules and regulations for online food deliveries while also launching public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about food safety.

The ministry recently released a 78-page handbook outlining labels, claims, and advertising messages considered misleading or unfair to consumers. Prior to the publication of the handbook, the MFDS revised relevant regulations in February, making them stricter and more punitive. The ministry is also expanding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in inspections and monitoring activities.

Spoiled food items in online foods are not the only concern. With the growing global popularity of Korean cuisine, counterfeit Korean food products exported abroad have emerged as another major issue. In several cases during 2025, the regulator detected fake products that copied the brand names and packaging of well-known Korean food companies while containing counterfeit contents inside. More than 800 counterfeit cases were identified in the first half of 2025 alone. These fake products are typically sold at lower prices than genuine ones, making them attractive to unsuspecting consumers. Authorities fear that such practices could damage the reputation of legitimate Korean food exporters at a time when the country's food exports are expanding rapidly. In 2025, food exports grew by 7 per cent compared to the previous year.

The MFDS has also uncovered cases involving banned ingredients. The illegal use of imported ants as a food ingredient is one. While ants are not permitted for use in food products, authorities in 2025 detected the illegal use of imported ants in food preparation. The violation involved nearly 12,000 servings and was valued at approximately \$87,000. Such violations can sometimes contribute to food poisoning incidents. Between July and September 2023 alone, South Korea recorded more than 350 food poisoning cases affecting around 9,000 people. The government has set a target of limiting large-scale food poisoning incidents involving 300 or more people to no more than two cases annually.

Another growing concern associated with online food sales is misleading labelling and unfair advertising. Some advertisements make exaggerated health claims, such as diabetes prevention or height growth in children. Product labels also, several times, include questionable health-related claims. The handbook published by the ministry aims to educate both consumers and food producers about acceptable and prohibited terminology.

For example, a product cannot be labelled or marketed as a “health functional food” unless it has received official approval. Health functional foods are defined as products manufactured using ingredients that have been scientifically proven. These products must also receive certification from the ministry and carry an official mark identifying the specific health function for which they have been approved.

This crackdown indicates that digital convenience cannot come at the cost of public health, transparency, and trust in the marketplace. It also shows that in an era where food can be ordered with a single click and delivered before sunrise, food regulators are being forced to rethink traditional approaches to food safety and consumer protection. Its actions demonstrate that food safety and consumer protection can no longer be treated as secondary concerns in the digital marketplace. They also reflect the growing challenges faced by governments in regulating the rapidly expanding online food economy.

South Korea’s approach could become an important model for other nations seeking to regulate the modern food delivery ecosystem

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