

16 October 2025

From Shelves to Skylights: Council's Efforts to Safeguard Consumers This Diwali

As Diwali draws near, the spirit of celebration fills the air across Fiji. Homes are being cleaned and decorated, families are preparing traditional sweets, and shoppers are filling markets and supermarkets in search of gifts, groceries, and fireworks. The festival of lights, one of the most celebrated occasions on Fiji's cultural calendar, symbolises goodness, hope, and renewal.

But as the excitement grows, so too does the need for caution. The Consumer Council of Fiji is reminding all consumers that awareness and vigilance are essential during this busy season. Festive periods often see a rise in unethical practices, from traders selling expired or unsafe goods to deceptive promotions that exploit the increased demand.

This week, we are focusing on two key areas: the sale of food and grocery items in local markets and supermarkets, and the safe purchase and use of fireworks.

Council Steps Up Market Surveillance Across the Country

As part of its annual festive season operations, the Council has intensified market surveillance across major towns and municipalities. Council officers have been carrying out unannounced inspections in supermarkets, open markets, and retail stores, assessing whether traders are adhering to fair trading practices and maintaining quality and hygiene standards.

These checks are not new. Every year, the Council conducts similar surveillance activities during high-demand periods such as Diwali, Christmas, and back-to-school seasons. However, this year's inspections have revealed some particularly concerning trends.

The findings highlight the need for consumers to remain cautious, not only to protect their wallets but also their health.

What the Council Found During Market Surveillance

Market surveillance officers observed several recurring issues that continue to appear across retail outlets and municipal markets. These include both hygiene concerns and breaches of product safety and labeling requirements.

Among the most notable findings were:

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- **Expired Dairy Products:** Shelves in several supermarkets were found displaying expired dairy goods such as milk, butter, and yogurt alongside fresh stock. Such practices mislead consumers and pose a direct risk of foodborne illness.
- **Fungal Growth in Garlic Packs:** Packaged garlic and other perishables were found with visible signs of fungal growth, a result of poor ventilation and inadequate stock monitoring.
- **Infested Rice and Grains:** In certain outlets, rice and pulses showed evidence of weevils and insect infestation, indicating poor storage conditions and a lack of stock rotation.
- **Wilted Vegetables and Rotten Fruits:** In open markets, vendors were selling spoiled fruits and wilted vegetables at full prices, often concealing the damaged portions.
- **Damaged Packaging:** Several powdered food products, including pea besan and milk powder, were displayed in torn or punctured packets, increasing the risk of contamination and reduced freshness.
- **Improper Labelling and Pricing:** Some retailers failed to display clear prices or correct labeling, creating confusion and increasing the potential for overcharging.

Such findings reinforce the Council's concern that some traders continue to prioritise profit over consumer welfare, particularly during periods of high demand. The sale of expired, contaminated, or improperly labelled goods not only breaches consumer protection laws but also erodes public trust in Fiji's marketplace.

How Consumers Can Protect Themselves

While the Council continues to monitor and report market irregularities, consumers also play an important role in ensuring a safe and fair marketplace. Shoppers are urged to remain alert and actively examine products before making purchases.

Here are key steps consumers should follow:

1. Check expiry dates carefully before purchasing packaged or perishable items. Expired products can cause food poisoning or other health issues.
2. Inspect packaging for damage such as tears, punctures, or leaks. Avoid products that look tampered with or poorly sealed.

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3. Examine fruits and vegetables for signs of spoilage, mould, or bruising. If a product doesn't look fresh, do not buy it.
4. Avoid products without price tags or proper labeling, as these may lead to confusion at checkout or potential overcharging.
5. Keep receipts for all purchases. They serve as evidence if you need to lodge a complaint or return a product.
6. Report any cases of expired or unsafe goods to the Consumer Council through the National Consumer Helpline 155 or via the Council's social media pages.

By being vigilant and reporting dishonest practices, consumers not only protect themselves but also help the Council identify repeat offenders and strengthen consumer protection in Fiji.

Fireworks Safety: Keeping the Festival of Lights Safe for All

As Diwali night approaches, fireworks will once again illuminate the skies across Fiji. While they bring excitement and beauty to the celebration, they can also be dangerous if purchased or handled carelessly.

This year, the Council's surveillance teams also turned their attention to the sale of fireworks. Inspections revealed that while most retailers were complying with regulations, some were selling fireworks with partially opened or damaged packaging — a serious concern that could lead to malfunction or injury.

Fireworks that have been exposed to moisture, heat, or tampering can fail to ignite properly or explode unpredictably. Consumers must take great care to purchase only safe, intact, and properly packaged fireworks from licensed sellers.

The Council advises consumers to follow these important safety guidelines:

- Buy fireworks from authorised retailers to ensure the products meet safety standards.
- Check packaging integrity. Do not buy boxes that are open, torn, or missing safety instructions.
- Read all usage directions carefully before lighting fireworks.
- Dispose of used fireworks safely once they have completely cooled down.
- Retain receipts in case a defective or unsafe product needs to be returned or reported.

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By following these simple safety practices, Fijians can ensure that the festival of lights remains a time of joy and not injury. The Council also reminds traders of their legal duty to store fireworks responsibly. Fireworks must be kept in cool, dry areas, away from direct sunlight or sources of heat, and sold only within permitted periods.

Celebrate Safely, Shop Smartly

The Council's surveillance activities are ongoing, and additional checks will continue throughout the Diwali period to ensure compliance and protect consumer interests. The Council reiterates that every Fijian deserves to celebrate Diwali with confidence, knowing that the products they buy are safe, fairly priced, and of good quality. Consumers who encounter unsafe or unethical trading practices are urged to report these immediately through the National Consumer Helpline on 155, by email at complaints@consumersfiji.org.

This Diwali, the Council reminds everyone that safety and awareness are as important as celebration and joy. Together, let's make this festival of lights not just bright, but safe, fair, and meaningful for all.



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