

Poor hygiene blamed for rise in foodborne illnesses

► Inconsistent practices among food handlers and low awareness fuelling preventable outbreaks across Malaysia

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PETALING JAYA: Food safety experts warn that poor hygiene in food preparation, such as using dirty chopping boards, can contribute to the spread of foodborne illnesses, which affect over a million people globally each day.

They stress that food handlers play a vital role in preventing such outbreaks, provided hygiene protocols are strictly followed.

Universiti Putra Malaysia food safety expert Dr Noor Azira Abdul Mutalib said consistent hygiene practices among food handlers are critical to reducing the 1.6 million daily cases of foodborne diseases reported by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

"The most crucial step in reducing the global burden of foodborne illnesses starts with food handlers themselves. It's essential that they not only understand food safety protocols but also apply them consistently in their daily operations," she said.

She called for more rigorous and frequent audits, particularly in public food establishments, due to the potential health risks involved.

"Food safety inspections must be carried out more stringently, especially in establishments

where food is prepared for immediate public consumption."

Noor Azira added that inspection frequency could be tailored based on past hygiene performance, with stricter oversight for businesses that have previously failed to comply.

She also expressed concern over smaller vendors and roadside stalls, which often operate with limited oversight.

"Small food vendors and stalls are often more vulnerable to food safety lapses as they may not receive proper food safety training and less frequent inspections.

"Their working conditions, such as exposure to pests, pollution, limited clean water and poor waste disposal, raise contamination risks, while many staff lack proper food hygiene knowledge due to insufficient training or certification."

While many food handlers in Malaysia understand basic hygiene principles, Noor Azira said applying them consistently remains a challenge, particularly in informal settings.

"Some food handlers often feel pressured to prepare food quickly while maintaining cleanliness, and long working hours can cause fatigue, reducing their motivation to follow proper hygiene practices."

She said Malaysia has a solid foundation for food safety training, with the Health Ministry's Food Safety and Quality Division leading initiatives such as the free BESS (Bersih, Selamat, Sihat) certification scheme to help ensure safe food preparation.

"However, the main issue is getting food handlers to consistently apply what they've learnt. Training should be improved to cover areas such as allergen management, food fraud, digital monitoring and pest control.

"It must also cater to street vendors, cloud kitchens and home-based operators, be available in multiple languages and include

regular refresher courses."

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia public health specialist Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh said Malaysia largely aligns with WHO food safety standards, supported by surveillance systems, online reporting tools and training for vendors.

She said the Food Safety and Quality Division oversees national safety efforts, including monitoring foodborne illnesses and antimicrobial resistance in partnership with other agencies, academic institutions and industry players.

"These efforts include training programmes and implementation of the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point system in food service settings.

"Food and waterborne diseases, including food poisoning, are notifiable under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act. They are addressed through prevention, screening and proper management practices."

Sharifa said foodborne illnesses in Malaysia are widespread and caused by bacteria, viruses, parasites, toxins or foreign objects in food.

Symptoms typically include diarrhoea, vomiting and fever, posing higher risks to children, the elderly, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems.

She added that contamination does not only stem from food but could also occur through unsafe water, animal contact or poor personal hygiene.

WHO estimates that 1.6 million people globally fall ill each day due to unsafe food.

In Malaysia, foodborne illnesses remain a serious concern.

Last year, several notable outbreaks occurred, including 65 students falling ill in Kedah, two fatalities in Selangor, about 100 affected in Johor and a typhoid outbreak involving 10 students in Kelantan.