

Mass food poisoning traced to safety lapses

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PETALING JAYA: Lapses in food safety practices during large-scale food preparation are a common trigger for food poisoning outbreaks, experts say.

Public health expert Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said when institutions have financial and operational constraints, there can be non-compliance with hygiene and safety protocols.

“This situation could be the primary reason for food poisoning, as institutions often lack standard operating procedures (SOP), proper training and enforcement, which is compounded by high-risk practices such as large-scale food preparation by limited staff and prolonged food storage,” he said.

Dr Zainal was commenting on a recent case involving 27 students and elderly residents at a tahfiz school in Sungai Buloh who were down with diarrhoea and vomiting after consuming food from an external source.

He added that unsafe handling and poor hygiene rather than the food itself can cause people to get food poisoning.

“Some food handlers cross-contaminate among utensils or handle cooked food with dirty utensils.

“There can be food handlers storing cooked food at room temperature for too long, allowing bacteria to multiply,” he said.

While most victims recover, Dr

Zainal warned that food poisoning can lead to hospitalisation and serious complications.

“Salmonella is a leading cause of fatal foodborne illnesses in Malaysia.

“Risks include severe dehydration, septicaemia (blood poisoning) and complications from anti-microbial-resistant bacteria, though recent incidents have avoided ICU admissions.”

He stressed that solutions must come from both government and community levels.

“There can be targeted enforcement and training for institutions, mandatory certification for all food handlers and strict enforcement of the Food Act 1983 with closures for violations.

“At a community level, there can be implementation of a robust food safety SOP,” he said.

Universiti Putra Malaysia consultant clinical microbiologist Prof Dr Zamberi Sekawi also pointed out that food handlers are often the starting point of food poisoning.

“Food poisoning outbreaks occur when food is prepared in large quantities and safety lapses happen, from improper storage and inadequate cooking to contamination during handling,” he said, adding that the causes are often a combination of factors, rather than a single reason.

He added that hot weather can further accelerate bacterial growth if food is left at room temperature for too long.

Zamberi stressed that food safety must be strengthened at



Food poisoning cases since 2024

2024

> A Year Four pupil in Sandakan died after eating cheese tarts. He developed diarrhoea, fever and loss of appetite, later suffered a seizure, and was rushed to hospital. He required emergency respiratory support and was later confirmed dead.

> A Form Five student and a two-year-old girl died due to food poisoning in Gombak. Both had diarrhoea after eating fried bee hoon and eggs.

2025

> Over **800 staff** and family members from a government agency were affected by food poisoning during their Family Day event at a theme park. **Three hundred and twenty-two** out of 4,710 people exposed had diarrhoea, vomiting and stomach pain. Most victims were adults.

> **Four hundred and twenty-seven** from a private higher education institution in Kota Baru had food poisoning due to an unlicensed caterer. The chicken curry served was suspected to be the cause. Symptoms included stomach pain, diarrhoea, dizziness, nausea, vomiting and fever.

2026

> **Twenty-seven students** and elderly residents at a tahfiz school in Sungai Buloh had vomiting and diarrhoea after consuming food from an external source.

> A Kajang school canteen was closed for two weeks for investigation after pupils reported vomiting, dizziness and stomach aches from eating there.

Source: News reports

TheStargraphics

every level.

Universiti Malaya senior lecturer Dr Muhamad Afiq Aziz said food is often cooked early or brought in by outside caterers, and the main reason for rising

cases is leaving cooked food at room temperature for too long.

He said once food sits out for more than two hours, bacteria multiply rapidly and make it unsafe.