



health

Department of
Health
FREE STATE PROVINCE

FOOD SAFETY

What is food safety?

Contaminated food and water have been known to be sources of illness in human societies since antiquity. Food borne diseases are still among the most widespread health problems in the contemporary world. In rich and poor countries alike, they impose substantial health burdens, ranging in severity from mild indisposition to fatal illnesses.

Food safety is an increasingly important public health issue and according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), governments all over the world are intensifying their efforts to improve food safety. This is largely due to rapid globalisation and the emphasis placed on and the interest shown in the importance of the safety of food crossing national boundaries in international trade. Together with this, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people travelling internationally for, amongst others, tourism and business purposes, including the attendance of special events such as sport, cultural and others.

The WHO defines 'Food Safety' as the assurance that food will not cause harm to the consumer when prepared and/or eaten in accordance with its intended use. Furthermore 'Food Hygiene' is defined, as all the measures necessary to ensure the safety, soundness and wholesomeness of food at all stages from its production or manufacture until its final consumption.

Food safety in South Africa

The services rendered by health authorities in South Africa aimed at ensuring that the food consumers are exposed to do not cause them any harm, is generally referred to as "food safety control". This can be defined as a mandatory regulatory activity of enforcement by the relevant health authority to provide consumer protection and to ensure that all foods during production, handling, storage, processing, and distribution are safe and fit for human consumption and conform to safety requirements as prescribed by law (WHO).

Various health authorities within the national health system at national, provincial and municipal levels, as well as organizers of special events such as the upcoming FIFA Confederation Cup and, service providers such as caterers / suppliers of food, are the three most important role players responsible for ensuring that the food safety management aspect and thus food hygiene, is effectively addressed during such events. Everyone has a role to play, even the consumer in ensuring that foods eaten are safe and will not cause harm.

Although South Africa is considered a developing country, the food industry of the country can be considered as a well developed and sophisticated sector, geared towards providing the needs of consumers through both the formal and informal sectors of the country's economy. From food production on the farm, to further processing at factory level, through to retail level, both as foodstuffs offered for sale to consumers at outlets such as supermarkets or shops (spaza shops- within disadvantaged communities), or further prepared as ready to eat meals by catering facilities such as restaurants, fast food outlets, street food vendors, etc.; legislation exists aimed at ensuring that all foodstuffs and food handling facilities comply to health standards aimed at protecting consumers from unsafe food and food prepared under unhygienic conditions.

To ensure compliance, Environmental Health Practitioners (EHPs) are employed by provincial and municipal health authorities within the locations where the 2009 FIFA Confederation Cup tournament will be hosted, who will be responsible to monitor all foodstuffs and facilities through regular inspections and sampling of foodstuffs in the interest of ensuring that all parties concerned play their part in protecting consumers from the risks of unsafe foodstuffs.

Although South Africa was not isolated from the effects of the issue related to the presence of melamine in milk and dairy products that originated from China during the second half of 2008, steps were taken swiftly by all the health authorities concerned, which ensured that no health risk to consumers occurred. As the case is with most countries in the world, both developed and developing, cases of food poisoning do occur from time to time. However, visitors to South Africa can be assured that no serious incidents of food poisoning were reported recently from most urban areas within the country, including the locations where the 2009 FIFIA Confederation Cup tournament will be hosted.

Five Keys to Safer Foods

The Department of Health supports the training programme for food handlers developed by the WHO on the 'Five Keys to Safer Foods' and is currently in the process of rolling it out countrywide to the provinces and municipalities through the six universities of technologies involved in the training of Environmental Health Practitioners. The Department further encourages those who wish to prepare the own meals to also apply the following principles of the Five Keys programme:

- Keeping hands as well as surfaces coming into contact with food always clean.
- Separate raw and cooked foods to prevent cross contamination.
- Cook all foods thoroughly.
- Keep food at a safe temperature at all times, which is either below 5°C, or above 60°C.
- Use safe water and raw materials when preparing food.

Although foodstuffs sold by formal outlets such as supermarkets, restaurants, fast food outlets, etc. are generally of high quality and considered to be safe, visitors are, accept for in the case of fresh fruits and vegetables, advised to be cautious when obtaining foodstuffs, especially ready to eat prepared meals and other dishes, from informal outlets such as street food vendors. The general rule that applies in these instances is: **peel it...., cook it...., cool it...., or, leave it!**