

2 April 2015 | Cairo – New data on the harm caused by foodborne illnesses underscore the global threats posed by unsafe foods, and the need for coordinated, cross-border action across the entire food supply chain, according to the World Health Organization, which next week is dedicating its annual World Health Day to the issue of food safety.

World Health Day will be celebrated on 7 April, with WHO highlighting the challenges and opportunities associated with food safety under the slogan of “From farm to plate, make food safe.”

“Unsafe food is known to be involved in more than 200 different diseases – from communicable diseases, such as cholera and other diarrhoeal diseases, to a range of noncommunicable diseases, including various forms of cancer,” said Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

Examples of unsafe food include under-cooked foods of animal origin, fruits and vegetables contaminated with faeces, and shellfish containing marine biotoxins.

“Foodborne and waterborne diarrhoeal diseases kill an estimated 2 million people each year, including many children. This is particularly the case in developing countries, where food supplies are insecure and where people tend to be more exposed to unsafe foods in which chemical, microbial and other hazards pose serious health risks,” the Regional Director added.

Today, WHO is issuing the first findings from what is a broader ongoing analysis of the global burden of foodborne diseases. The full results of this research, being undertaken by WHO’s Foodborne Disease Burden Epidemiology Reference Group, are expected to be released in October 2015.

Some important results are related to enteric infections caused by viruses, bacteria and protozoa that enter the body by ingestion of contaminated food. They show that, in 2010:

- there were an estimated 582 million cases of 22 different foodborne enteric diseases and

351 000 associated deaths;

- the African Region recorded the highest disease burden for enteric foodborne disease, followed by South-East Asia;

- over 40% people suffering from enteric diseases caused by contaminated food were children aged under 5 years.

Efforts to prevent such emergencies can be strengthened, however, through development of robust food safety systems that drive collective government and public action to safeguard against chemical or microbial contamination of food.

“Despite the fact that governments have committed themselves to establish, operate and maintain well-functioning food safety systems, food safety systems in some countries are still fragmented, under-funded and under-staffed. In addition, food safety authorities are often restricted in their powers and find themselves struggling to take appropriate public health action because of old and out-dated legislation,” Dr Alwan reiterated.

“Of the 22 countries of the Easternn Mediterranean Region, only 5 have reported that they meet completely the core capacity requirements of the International Health Regulations with regard to food safety. Overall, the countries of the Region report an average of only 75% fulfilment of the capacity to deal with food safety events of international concern,”he added.

Global and national level measures can be taken, including using international platforms, like the joint WHO-Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), to ensure effective and rapid communication during food safety emergencies.

At the consumer end of the food supply chain, the public plays important roles in promoting food safety, from practising safe food hygiene and learning how to take care when cooking specific foods that may be hazardous (like raw chicken), to reading the labels when buying and preparing food. The WHO Five Keys to Safer Food explain the basic principles that each individual should know all over the world to prevent foodborne diseases.

WHO is working to ensure access to adequate, safe, nutritious food for everyone. The Organization supports countries to prevent, detect and respond to foodborne disease

outbreaks—in line with the Codex Alimentarius, a collection of international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice covering all the main foods.

Related links

[Read more on World Health Day](#)

[Global Burden of Foodborne Diseases](#)

INFOSAN

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