

Contaminated food main cause for food-borne diseases: WHO

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Three in ten children, under the age of five years, suffer from diarrhea which is a major childhood killer in the Region.

These statistics from WHO's first ever report on the estimated burden of foodborne disease underscores the need to take immediate measures to make food safety a public health priority.

"The Region accounts for more than half of the global infections and deaths due to typhoid fever or hepatitis A. Foodborne diseases account for a significant proportion of the burden of disease in the Region. Diarrheal diseases are the leading cause of foodborne disease burden in the Region. Some 55 million children under the age of five fall ill and 32000 die from diarrheal diseases in the South-East Asia Region every year," said Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia.

Food contaminated with harmful bacteria, viruses, parasites, toxins and chemicals are the main causes of foodborne diseases.

Consumption of unsafe food causes nausea, vomiting and diarrhea as an immediate effect, and has more serious long-term implications such as cancer, failure of kidney and liver and brain and neural disorders.

Foodborne diseases are most dangerous to the young children, pregnant women and older people.

In addition to the serious health impact, foodborne diseases present a major cost to economies.

"The risk of foodborne diseases is the highest in the low- and middle-income settings where hygiene, safe water for preparing food, and adequate food production and storage conditions remain a challenge. This is further compounded by insufficient food safety legislation or its enforcement," said Dr Poonam.

She continued, "The global report is a reminder that governments, the food industry as well as individuals need to make more

collaborative efforts to make food safe and prevent foodborne illnesses."

Dr Poonam encouraged that all food operators and consumers should understand the roles they must play to protect their health and that of the wider community.

"The food safety systems should ensure that food producers and suppliers, along the entire food chain, operate responsibly and supply safe food to consumers. The governments must put in place policies and regulatory frameworks - establishing and implementing effective food safety systems," she added.

The deaths and diseases caused by contaminated food can be prevented through improving hygiene, sanitation and other public health measures such as safe drinking water, enforcement of food safety legislation and public awareness and education on safe food handling. "WHO is prioritizing and drawing global attention to food safety," she pointed.

This year the theme for the World Health Day, celebrated on 7 April every year, was food safety - from farm to plate, make food safe.