

SFA reminds food operators and consumers to be vigilant and ensure good food and personal hygiene practices during the upcoming festive season

Ahead of the upcoming festive season, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) would like to remind food operators and consumers to be vigilant and practise good food, personal and environmental hygiene. This is because a significant number of gastroenteritis incidents tend to occur during the October-March period. During this festive period, more consumers also dine out, order catered food or purchase cooked/ready-to-eat food for celebrations.

Causes of gastroenteritis

2 Gastroenteritis is a condition characterised by the inflammation of the stomach and intestines. Common symptoms of gastroenteritis include diarrhoea or vomiting, depending on whether it is caused by bacteria/bacterial toxins or viruses.

- a. Bacterial gastroenteritis (BGE) outbreaks are caused by bacteria such as *Salmonella* introduced into food due to poor food preparation practices.
- b. Viral gastroenteritis (VGE) outbreaks are caused by viruses such as *Norovirus*, which can be transmitted in a number of ways. For example, norovirus can be transmitted from person to person or via contaminated food/water and surfaces in common areas, as a result of improper food handling, environmental cleaning and poor hand hygiene.

3 Based on available data, the Ministry of Health (MOH) estimates that 69 percent of the gastroenteritis incidents in Singapore were due to consuming contaminated food items while the remaining 31 percent were due to VGE with person-to-person transmission or contact with contaminated environments.

Food hygiene and safety must be the industry's priority

4 Ahead of this festive period, SFA has issued an advisory to all food operators to ensure food hygiene and safety. SFA has reminded operators of food retail establishments to ensure that all their food handlers have attended the requisite basic hygiene training and are registered with SFA, and that food handlers do not engage in any food preparation if they are unwell. Food operators must also ensure that they have adequate capacity to handle their orders and maintain a proper system to manage the orders that they take on during this festive period, including for take-out services, to ensure that food hygiene and public health are not compromised.

5 SFA has also been working closely with the relevant agencies and industry to strengthen safeguards for food safety and hygiene. For example, given the incidents of VGE outbreaks in preschools earlier in the year and the greater vulnerability of young children, SFA worked with the Early Childhood Development Agency and MOH to jointly conduct briefing sessions for food handlers and cleaners in preschools to promote good personal, food and environmental hygiene practices. Close to 1,200

participants attended the sessions, and they reported that the briefing was a useful reminder of food safety and hygiene practices. SFA is also engaging key representatives from the Association of Catering Professionals Singapore (ACAPS), the Restaurant Association of Singapore (RAS) and the Singapore Hotel Association (SHA) about the importance of food hygiene and safety. We have advised them to issue similar reminders to their members.

Food safety and hygiene: A joint responsibility

6 While SFA will work closely with other government agencies to safeguard food hygiene and safety (see Annex A), SFA would like to urge consumers be vigilant and support efforts to ensure food hygiene and safety. Consumers should follow SFA's guide (https://www.sfa.gov.sg/docs/default-source/our-services/guidelines-for-eating-safely-during-festive-season_070319.pdf) for eating safely.

7 In particular, consumers should be aware that every catered meal carries an inherent risk, as catered food is prepared in bulk and in advance. SFA requires caterers to adopt a Food Safety Management System to ensure that good practices are observed in the preparation of catered meals, and to time-stamp the meals to inform consumers of the recommended 'consume by' time. At the same time, consumers should consume the food as soon as possible, within the stipulated 'consume by' time. Consumers should also engage only licensed caterers, whose track records (hygiene grading, number of demerit points and suspension history) are

available on SFA's website (<https://www.sfa.gov.sg/food-retail/sfa-food-establishment-licenses>).

Ensure environmental and personal hygiene

8 While people can come down with gastroenteritis if they consume contaminated food, the same viruses, bacteria or bacterial toxins can also be transmitted through the environment or infected persons. For instance, vomit of an infected person is likely to be infectious and can lead to the transmission of virus from person to person, or if the contaminated surfaces are not cleaned thoroughly.

9 As such, besides food safety, SFA would like to encourage all parties to ensure good environmental and personal hygiene to prevent gastroenteritis incidents. In particular, places serving more vulnerable groups, such as preschools, should exercise good and appropriate cleaning practices to prevent the spread of gastroenteritis.

10 Members of the public should also observe good personal hygiene by:

- Washing hands with soap and water before eating and after going to the toilet;
- Covering mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, and throwing the tissue away into a bin immediately; and
- Not sharing food/drinks, eating utensils, toothbrushes or towels with others.



MEDIA RELEASE

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Annex A

SFA's efforts to safeguard food hygiene and safety

1 Between SFA's formation on 1 April and August 2019, SFA conducted more than 31,000 inspections on licensed food retail establishments, took more than 900 enforcement actions against operators who failed to comply with hygiene regulations, and suspended 35 licences. To further safeguard food safety and hygiene, SFA is also reviewing regulatory controls for caterers and will continue to engage our stakeholders.

2 In view of the festive period, SFA has issued an advisory to the food retail industry to remind them to adhere to good hygiene practices during food preparation and handling. We will also be stepping up our inspections of licensees that provide catering services and premises with substantial catering operations during this period. During the inspections, our officers will remind licensees and food handlers on proper food and personal hygiene practices. Should any hygiene infringements be observed, enforcement actions will be taken against the errant food operator. We will also require the food operator to rectify the non-compliance.

Additional information on SFA's food hygiene and safety regime

3 SFA has in place an integrated food hygiene and safety regime, which is guided by science-based risk assessment. The system comprises control measures such as regulations, licensing, inspection and surveillance. All SFA-licensed food

establishments must ensure that food hygiene and safety regulations are adhered to. This includes having the necessary infrastructure and trained expertise to ensure safe food preparation, handling and sale of food.

4 SFA will take enforcement actions against food operators who fail to comply with our food hygiene and safety regulations. This would include enforcement actions such as the issuing of letters of warning and composition fines. The top three common hygiene-related infringements committed by licensees of food retail establishments in 2018 were failure to keep licensed premises clean, failure to keep licensed premises free of pest infestation and failure to register food handlers.

5 As part of SFA's inspection framework, regular inspections are conducted for all food retail establishments. Categories of premises which pose higher risk (e.g. caterers, which prepare larger volume and variety of food in advance and served to a larger population with each order) are inspected more frequently. Similar frameworks which adopt a high-risk approach have already been put in place in countries such as UK, Belgium and USA.

6 As all licensed food operators are responsible for ensuring that food sold at food retail establishments is prepared hygienically and safe for consumption, the framework also aims to encourage the food retail industry to take greater ownership in observing good food and personal hygiene practices at all times.

7 With the implementation of a risk-based inspection framework, SFA will continue with our outreach efforts to educate operators on the importance of practising good food hygiene practices. Members of the public who come across poor hygiene practices in food retail establishments are advised not to patronise such outlets and to contact us at www.sfa.gov.sg/feedback with details for our follow-up investigations.