Regional Director's Message on World Health Day 2015

From farm to plate make food safe

This year, World Health Day focuses on Food Safety – a theme that resonates with everyone. Safe food is needed for everybody, from growing children and adolescents to pregnant women and older adults. Food safety involves everyone, from those in government and civil society to the private sector and communities that buy and prepare food.

Unsafe food and water are linked to the deaths of an estimated 2 million people annually – including many children. Unsafe food and water kills an estimated 700 000 children in WHO South-East Asia Region every year. Foodborne illnesses are usually either infectious or toxic in nature. These illnesses may occur through the consumption of food or water contaminated by bacteria, viruses, parasites or chemical substances. Foodborne pathogens such as Salmonella, *Escherichia coli,* or *Campylobacter* can cause severe illnesses or even death. Chemical contamination can lead to acute poisoning or long-term diseases such as cancer. Examples of unsafe food include uncooked foods of animal origin, and fruits and vegetables contaminated with faeces and chemicals.

The scope and concept of food safety is constantly evolving. Many years ago, food was generally grown and consumed locally in the village or town near where the food was harvested. Mass food production was limited to small local establishments and the occasional large social events such as weddings. Modern times have seen industrialization of food processing on national and global scales, adding another dimension to food safety.

There have also been changes in food production such as intensive agriculture and the growing use of antibiotics in animal husbandry. These changes have the potential to increase the risk of food becoming contaminated with elements harmful to human health.

Ensuring food safety starts with production at the farm level. Misuse of agro-chemicals, including pesticides, growth hormones and veterinary drugs may have harmful effects on human health. Microbial and chemical risks could be introduced at the farm-level (by using water contaminated by industrial or poultry farm waste for irrigation of crops). Good agricultural practices need to be applied to reduce microbial and chemical hazards.

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Food adulteration is still a problem in countries of the South-East Asia Region where informal food production and distribution systems are deeply entrenched at the community level. Examples of adulteration include the contamination of mustard oil with argemone oil in 1998 and of imported milk and infant formula with melamine in 2008. These events raised food safety concerns among consumers and policy-makers.

The South-East Asia Region is prone to natural disasters. Access to safe water and quality food is a major problem during floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis. There is a likelihood of food in the affected areas getting contaminated and causing outbreaks of food-borne disease. WHO has been advocating for food safety to be adequately incorporated in national disaster-management programmes.

WHO helps and encourages countries to prevent, detect and respond to foodborne disease outbreaks—in line with international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice covering the preparation and production of all the main foods. Recognizing that food safety is a cross-cutting issue, WHO welcomes the participation of non-public health sectors (i.e. agriculture, trade and commerce, environment, standardization) in this campaign and seeks the support of major international and regional agencies and organizations active in the fields of food, emergency aid, and education.

Political awareness and consumer education on food safety will help to strengthen enforcement of food standards, improve hygienic practices, and prevent foodborne illnesses. The most pertinent of all the measures is creating awareness among people to ensure that their food is safe. WHO promotes the 'five keys' to food safety – keep hands and food preparation surfaces clean, separate raw and cooked food, cook thoroughly, keep food stored at correct temperature, and use safe water and raw materials.

As part of a regional food safety strategy, WHO is assisting countries to initiate, develop and sustain multisectoral approaches and measures for promotion of food safety among all population groups. Some countries have taken novel and notable initiatives such as mobile food courts in Bangladesh, establishment of a Food Standard and Safety Authority in India, and certification of street food vendors with a "Clean Food, Good Taste" logo in Thailand.

Food safety is the shared responsibility of everyone. Food safety requires multisectoral collaboration from food production to consumption and cooperation to ensure compliance with acceptable food standards. The legal framework for food safety may exist, but its enforcement is a real challenge. Food quality and safety standards are usually strictly followed for exportable food commodities, but not always enforced for food destined for the domestic market.

As our food supply becomes increasingly globalized, the need to strengthen food safety systems in and between all countries is becoming more and more evident.

The saying that "we are what we eat" is absolutely apt and sums up the importance of safe food in human health. WHO is promoting efforts to improve food safety, from farm to plate (and everywhere in between) on World Health Day, 7 April 2015.

Let us work together to make our food safe to contribute to better health of people, since safe food promotes healthy lives.

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Safe Food = Healthy Lives

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FOOD SAFETY:
What you should know

From farm to plate, make food safe

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35. What kinds of plastics are used for food handling and storage and are there any health hazards of using it?

Plastic packaging plays a significant role in the shelf life and ease of storage and cooking for many foods and most are safe to use provided that they are used appropriately. Some kinds of plastics materials which are widely used for handling and storage of food and water are as follows:

1. Polyethylene terephthalate (PET) is used to make soft drink, water, sports drink, ketchup, and salad dressing bottles, and peanut butter, pickle, jelly and jam jars. It is strong, heat resistant and resistant to gases and acidic foods. It can be transparent or opaque. Not known to leach any chemicals that are suspected of causing cancer or disrupting hormones and it can be recycled.
2. High density polyethylene (HDPE) is used to make milk, water, and juice bottles, yogurt and margarine tubs and grocery, trash, and retail bags. High-density polyethylene is stiff and strong but is not heat stable (i.e. it melts at a relatively low temperature). Not known to leach any chemicals that are suspected of causing cancer or disrupting hormones and it can be recycled.
3. Low-density polyethylene (LDPE) is used to make films of various sorts, some bread and frozen food bags and squeezable bottles. Low-density polyethylene is relatively transparent. Many of the films are not heat stable either and may melt to the food if touching.
4. Polypropylene (PP) is more heat resistant, harder, denser and more transparent than polyethylene so is used for heat-resistant microwavable packaging and sauce or salad dressing bottles.
5. Polycarbonate is clear, heat resistant and durable and often used to make refillable water bottles and sterilisable baby bottles, microwave ovenware, eating utensils, plastic coating for metal cans. Tiny amounts of bisphenol A are formed when polycarbonate bottles are washed with harsh detergents or bleach (e.g., sodium hypochlorite). At high levels of exposure, bisphenol A is potentially hazardous because it mimics the female hormone estrogen.

In addition, polystyrene (PS) and polyvinyl chloride (PVC) are also used during food material transportation and handling in supermarkets. Modern food safe plastic bags are plasticizer-free and will not release harmful chemicals into your food while it is being cooked.

36. How can we reduce the migration of chemicals from plastic into food?

All plastic is made from chemicals that have the potential to harm a person's health. Proper use of plastic packaging lowers chemical migration. Following these simple tips will help to reduce the migration of chemicals from plastic into food;

- Follow manufacturers' instructions when using household plastics such as cling films and bags.
- Follow recommendations for cleaning products to be used on containers, bottles and lids.
- Use the correct type of plastic for the role, e.g. only use microwave-safe plastics in the microwave.
- Do not let cling film touch the food during microwave cooking as it melts at a low temperature. In many cases, the film should be removed before cooking in a microwave.
- Leave a corner of the dish uncovered to allow the steam to escape. This reduces the risk of the film being blown off and settling on to the food.
- Re-use plastic containers that are food compatible, in the way the original food was presented. For example, you can freeze food in ice-cream containers but don't heat them in the microwave – they were designed for use on cold food.

E. Food additives and fortification

37. What are food additives and why are they added?

Food additives are substances not normally consumed as a food by itself and are not normally used as a typical ingredient of the food, whether or not it has nutritive value. In many cases, the intentional addition certain additives to food is for a technological purpose (including organoleptic) in the manufacturing process, and may be added during the preparation, treatment, packing, packaging, transport or holding of such food. The term does not include contaminants, or substances added to food for maintaining or improving nutritional qualities, or sodium chloride. Adequate information shall be given about the manner in which the food additive is to be kept and is to be used in food.