

FINE DINING: (Left) Stacks of uncleared utensils might attract vermin and birds. This might lead to a higher fine of \$400 under NEA's new penalties. (Below) Rubbish strewn on the floor of a hawker centre.

TNP PICTURES:
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New rules, tougher action

Environment agency steps up penalties for poor hygiene standards at eateries

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AT a stall selling bak kut teh (pork ribs soup) in Maxwell Food Centre yesterday, a helper was seen chopping chillies – on a chopping board placed on the floor.

At Amoy Street Food Centre, a worker was seen wiping food scraps off the table – right onto the floor.

Both appeared to be oblivious to the harsher penalties for errant food establishments that are set to kick in today.

The new rules apply to hawker centres and food courts. They will apply to other establishments, such as restaurants and coffee shops, by the end of this year.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) announced last month that from today, fines for food hygiene offences will be increased from \$100 to between \$200 and \$400, depending on the severity of the offence. (See report at right.)

But a check by The New Paper at five hawker centres revealed that most hawkers and their helpers were either unaware of the new penalties or unsure of the details.

Apart from the Maxwell and Amoy Street food centres, The New Paper visited two hawker centres in Tampines and another along Hill Street.

Of 20 hawkers we spoke to yesterday, 12 admitted they had no clue about the new penalties.

"We work from morning till night – when do we get the time to read newspapers or watch the news?" said the helper who was chopping chillies at the bak kut teh stall in Maxwell Food Centre. He declined to be named and also won't say if he planned to step up hygiene measures.

Five said they had heard of the news, but were unsure of details and when the stricter measures would be put into place.

But an NEA spokesman said it has "briefed the industry" about the increase in fines for hygiene offences.

Said the spokesman: "NEA has also distributed notices to all food stall licensees in hawker centres and mailed notices to other licensees."

"In addition, NEA officers, during their routine hygiene inspections of food establishments, have been reminding licensees of the new fines."

Pancake seller Ong Keng Kiat, at the Maxwell Food Centre, was one hawker who wasn't sure when the change would be taking place.

But Mr Ong, whose stall has a B rating, said the new measures will not have any effect on how he prepares his food.

Mr Poh Cheng Giap, 56, who sells traditional desserts, agreed.

He said: "Singapore is a country that values cleanliness and so do I. I keep my stall clean but customers have to play their part too."

He has been selling desserts at the Maxwell Food Centre for the past 10 years and said he has always had an A rating by the NEA.

Ms Roseline Tan, in her 40s, a mutton soup seller at Amoy Street Food Centre, said she received the NEA brochure and plans to improve her hygiene standards.

Said Ms Tan, whose stall has a B rating: "I will be more mindful of my hygiene practices from now on, such as wiping surfaces more often and taking care to cover ingredients."

The five hawker centres we visited were generally clean, with the majority of the stalls rated either B or A by the NEA for hygiene.

But some customers did not appear concerned about hygiene ratings.

At the Amoy Street food centre, there was a long queue at a fish soup stall with a C rating.

Mr Kevin Tan, 32, a real estate agent who was in the queue, said: "As long as I don't fall sick from eating the food, I don't see why I should stop coming back."



Hygiene measures

TO improve food and personal hygiene standards in food establishments, the NEA will impose harsher penalties for hygiene-related offences from today.

For all hawkers, the minimum fine of \$100 will be increased to between \$200 and \$400, depending on the seriousness of the offence.

Serious offences include failing to keep food establishments free of vermin and insects and selling contaminated food, which will incur the maximum fine of \$400.

If a cleaner is caught sweeping food scraps onto the floor or using dirty rags to wipe tables, the hawker centre can be fined \$300. Failure to use plastic bags for refuse disposal will lead to a \$200 fine.

NEA will also require food handlers working at establishments that previously had their licences suspended to re-take and pass the Basic Food Hygiene Course before they can resume practice.

NEA enforcement officers issued 2,650 tickets for food hygiene-related offences last year. This was a 14 per cent drop from the year before but higher than the 2,212 tickets in 2007.