

# Tainted drinks or rolls the likely culprits

## Probe points to two items in Sports School mass food poisoning

■ BY AMANDA TAN

CORDIAL drinks and chicken frank rolls have been identified as the two possible sources of contamination which led to a mass outbreak of food poisoning at the Singapore Sports School last month.

The drinks were prepared by staff of ISS Catering Services, which was then the school's canteen operator, using a plastic bucket which was not clearly labelled.

One of the food handlers also tested positive for salmonella, which is commonly associated with food-borne diseases and bacteria from faeces or human skin.

That worker was made to stop working from the time of the outbreak until she was certified fit on Dec 7.

The findings were released yesterday following a joint probe conducted by the Ministry of Health, National Environment Agency (NEA) and the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority.

The food poisoning incident affected 106 Sports School students, who were laid low with diarrhoea and vomiting in the first week of November after eating food served at the school's dining hall. Shortly after the incident, ISS Catering Services was suspended from operating at the school.

In their joint statement yesterday, the three agencies said they could not determine the exact cause of the food poisoning in the absence of positive patient samples. But they identified what they suspected were possible causes.

Commenting on the use of plastic buckets to prepare drinks, the agencies highlighted that clear labelling of containers used for food is important, to "minimise risk of cross-contamination".

Another possible source of contamination was the chicken sausage rolls served at the dining hall.

But they were supplied by an external food company, Wei Cian Foods, which does not have any history of violating food safety requirements.

Of the six food samples taken from Wei Cian Foods, a low level of bacteria was found in only one sample of chicken frank rolls. This bacterium, known as *Bacillus cereus*, may cause food poisoning if found in high levels.

According to the authorities, the level found in the chicken frank roll sample "was not significant to be the cause of food poisoning".

Food handlers at Wei Cian Foods were not found to have food-borne pathogens, although one of them "was observed to handle ready-to-eat food with his bare hands", said the statement.

ISS Catering Services, which has more than 20 years of industry experience, will now have to review the systems and practices of all its 28 food outlets islandwide, as well as those of its sister company, ISS-CDCS Catering.

The company has been ordered to supervise "food preparation, storage, handling and transportation" more closely, as well as the hygiene quality of food products obtained from external suppliers.

But no demerit points will be issued to the caterer, as the findings were inconclusive, an NEA spokesman told The Straits Times.

ISS Catering Services, in a statement issued yesterday, said it has been using dedicated containers to mix drinks all along.

The company has also immediately implemented the recommendations by the authorities. "All containers used to prepare drinks have now been clearly and properly labelled at all outlets," it said.

It will also put additional measures in place, such as engaging external consultants to audit the entire supply chain and food processes.

Meanwhile, the Sports School said yesterday that it would not renew its contract with the caterer, which has been its dining hall operator since January 2008. The current contract ends on Dec 31.

Prior to last month's incident, the caterer was also involved in two earlier food poisoning cases at the school.

The school has called for a new tender and will appoint an independent food hygiene assessor to check on the new caterer, said Sports School principal Deborah Tan in a statement.

ISS Catering Services has offered compensation for the medical expenses incurred by those affected by last month's food poisoning case, Mrs Tan added. The school is also in discussions with the company for compensation due to the disruption of meal services following the incident.

✉ [tamanda@sph.com.sg](mailto:tamanda@sph.com.sg)



Sports School students being served boxed meals after the incident. ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE