

THE DANGERS THAT LURK...IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Bacteria thrive in places like hawker centres because food is often left in the open for long periods of time and at a temperature in which bacteria multiply. Food is also moved constantly between different temperatures – for example in and out of the fridge – giving bacteria a chance to flourish.

Associate Professor Helen Oh, senior consultant of infectious diseases at Changi General Hospital, said food poisoning is commonly caused by microbial agents such as bacteria and viruses or their toxins, for example salmonella or Escherichia coli. These disease-carrying agents are known as pathogens.

These are the dangers that

lurk in a food centre environment:

■ Rats, birds and cockroaches

Animals that move through refuse heaps and sewers can carry salmonella, which causes food poisoning, vomiting and diarrhoea, said Dr Oh. Rats and cockroaches, for example, may carry salmonella. They can also spread pathogens that cause dysentery and typhoid.

■ Dirty water

Bacteria is found in dirty or untreated water. Among them is Shigella which is found in untreated water from drains or jungle streams, and can cause dysentery if ingested.

But Dr Narayanan Saravanan, a general practitioner, said that

“this is very rare and unlikely in Singapore because health standards are very high”.

■ Faecal matter

Another way bacteria is transmitted is through what doctors called the faecal-oral route when faecal matter is ingested.

Dr Law Ngai Moh, a gastroenterologist at Raffles Hospital, said that dirty dishes, poor drainage and sewage disposal, or unhygienic food handling will increase the passage of pathogens from a person infected with them to another through this route.

Faecal matter may be found anywhere, from the floor to food handlers who do not wash their hands properly after they visit

the toilet. Illnesses such as typhoid fever, caused by Salmonella typhi, are transmitted through infected faeces or urine.

Typhoid cannot be transmitted from animals. It only comes about via humans.

However, doctors point out that a dirty environment seldom equates to food poisoning because the human immune system is quite strong.

Said Dr Saravanan: “Bacteria is everywhere and we’re swallowing it all the time. The body can cope with a lot of infection unless it’s an overload of bacteria. While food may be clean, it can never be sterile. The system of checks and balances in Singapore is very safe.”

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