

# CONSUMER KNOWLEDGE AND HANDLING PRACTICES OF MEAT AND MEAT PRODUCTS IN ARIMA, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO.

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**Background:** Food is essential for life yet if not properly handled can become a major cause for illness and even death. Several studies done internationally have indicated that a significant proportion of food-borne illness arises from unsafe food handling practices in the home (Scott et al., 1982, Scott, 1996; WHO, 2000).

**Objective:** The purpose of the study was to explore consumers' knowledge of food safety and their practices of handling meat and meat products in order to provide information to assist in educating the consumer about preventing food borne illnesses.

**Design:** A questionnaire was self administered to one hundred and thirty consumers over the age of eighteen years residing in the Arima district, who were selected by convenience sampling. The questionnaire enquired on knowledge of food borne illnesses and food safety principles and handling, storage and preparation of meat and meat products.

**Results:** The study found that 87.7% of consumers were aware of the term food borne illness and 72.3% knew that salmonella was a food borne pathogen. The majority of the sample had experienced a food borne illness (62.3%) where the symptoms experienced the most were diarrhoea (66.9%), abdominal cramps (39.2%) and vomiting (33.8%). Of those who experienced food borne illness 32.4% visited a healthcare provider.

**Conclusion:** Consumers' decision that meat was not good for purchasing was influenced by appearance of meat, environment of the dealer and the type or quality of packaging (48%). Most

consumers determined that meat should be thrown away by smell (80.8%) and appearance (68.5%). The majority of the sample washed hands with soap before preparing (90.8%) and 97.7% washed hands after handling meat and meat products and before touching other food items. Some consumers thaw meat on counter tops (20%) and most consumers reheated food until hot (45.4%) and steaming hot (47.7%).