

ABSTRACT

Food Safety Awareness and Practices of Consumers in Four Caribbean Countries

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Food safety is an important contributory factor to health and development. However, every year, the consumption of unsafe food results in hundreds of millions of persons worldwide suffering from foodborne illnesses (foodborne diseases), and the deaths of many of the persons affected. This makes foodborne illness a serious public health problem, impacting on a large percentage of the population. Educating consumers empowers them to help prevent these diseases and protect their own health.

Research was carried out to assess food safety knowledge, awareness and practices of 3,276 consumers in Barbados, Belize, Jamaica and St. Vincent & the Grenadines. The survey revealed that 53.6% of persons interviewed usually delayed refrigeration of cooked meals containing meat, fish or poultry for over two hours. Several persons (28.8%) thought that cooked meat or poultry was safe to eat after being left unrefrigerated overnight; 26.6% thought that cooked fish left unrefrigerated overnight was safe. It was found that 10.1% of the sample did not always cleanse with soap before preparing food, and that after handling raw meat, fish or poultry 16.1% would not wash their hands with soap before continuing to cook.

Several problems relating to environmental health were identified. These included domestic animals entering the kitchen of 22.7%, rats or mice in

31% of households, a similar figure reporting seeing cockroaches and 56.9% reported houseflies on tables or countertops in the kitchen. Garbage bins in the kitchen or storage areas outside were often left uncovered (16.4% and 33.7% respectively) and for 24.1% of households garbage was reportedly collected less than once per week or not at all.

Many consumers were not aware that food safety could be a problem in their homes. Knowledge of hormones and GMOs as possible food safety problems was limited, and the vast majority were unable to recognise the names of several organisms associated with foodborne illness. Nearly two thirds (64.0%) of respondents did not know that there are certain population groups e.g. the elderly, the young and the immunocompromised that are especially vulnerable to foodborne illness.

Foodborne illness had affected no more than 8.9% of the respondents and was associated with. Except for raw eggs in shakes and batter, raw foods from animals were not commonly eaten.

It was recommended that the findings of this survey be used to inform food safety programmes in the survey countries and other Caribbean countries. Targets for intervention were identified for such programmes and other recommendations were made for further research to be carried out.

Keywords: Audrey Morris; Consumer food safety; Caribbean food safety; foodborne illness; foodborne disease