

Concerns as 43 die of food poisoning in 2wks

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Multiple cases of suspected food poisoning in some states in the country have recently raised serious concerns among the populace about possible chemical contamination as well as the hygienic conditions under which most consumables are being processed in Nigeria.

At the last count, the casualty figures arising from suspected food poisoning across the country have hit 43 with several others still lying critically ill in hospitals from such incidents in the past few weeks.

The development has seen public health practitioners, nutritionists and other stakeholders advocate improved food safety regulations and hygiene.

Lately, fatal food poisonings have been reported in Sokoto, Kano, Kogi, Anambra, Nasarawa and Kwara states. Last week, in Eruda community of Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State, a 70-year-old woman, her 34-year-old son and two grandchildren died shortly after eating a yam flour meal (amala).

On Monday this week, in Oshin community, Asa Dam area of Ilorin, a housewife and her three children, all less than 10 years, reportedly died at the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital after consuming a rice meal.

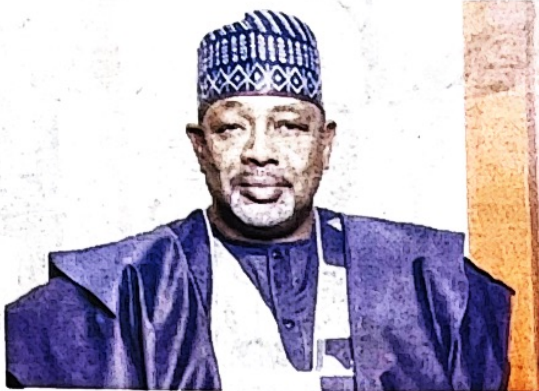
The father of the deceased is still on admission in the same hospital at the time of this report.

Earlier this month, four children and their mother were confirmed to have died of suspected poisoning at Abubor Nnewichi community, in Nnewi North Local Government Area of Anambra State.

Also, in Sokoto State, a family of seven were reported to have died after eating a cassava delicacy at Runjin Barmo village of Kajiji District in Shagari Local Government Area.

On Sunday, in the same Shagari LGA of Sokoto State, five, out of seven members of a family died after allegedly consuming a soup prepared with a local fertiliser popularly known as Gishirin Jalle.

Confirming the incident, the State Commissioner for Health, Asabe Balarabe said the tragedy occurred in Kaurar Wanke village, when the victims consumed the soup, prepared



■ Minister of Agriculture, Abubakar Kyari

with the substance, mistaking it for seasoning.

According to the commissioner, three of the victims died on Friday while the remaining two died in her presence at Specialist Hospital Sokoto on Sunday. It was a similar story in Nasarawa State more than a week ago when six people from the same family died in Gidinye community of Obi LGA after a meal.

In Kano, the death of a mother and her five kids from abdominal complication treatment, after eating a local delicacy in Karkari village, Gwarzo LGA of the state, was said to have evoked tears and emotions from residents.

The deceased were said to have consumed Danwake, a local delicacy made from an expired cassava flour.

According to a neighbour of the family, the widow, who was catering for her five children, used expired cassava flour to prepare the meal.

Few days ago, the Kogi State Government announced that six persons died after eating cassava flour said to have been contaminated in a household at Anyoke, Okunchi Ward, in Adavi LGA of the state.

Commenting on the Kwara incident, the state's Commissioner for Health, Dr Amina El-Imam, said that amala made from lafun (cassava flour) could have been responsible for the deaths at Eruda.

"It was observed that the residence was in a location where personal and environmental hygiene was not really optimal. This is a case of chemical food poisoning, potentially due to under-processed cassava used in the production of lafun", she stated.

Farmers attribute incidents to food hoarding

The national vice president of the Association of All Farmers Association of Nigeria (AFAN), Ajibola Olawale Tajudeen, in an interview with Daily Trust, attributed some of the developments to hoarding of food items.

According to him: "It is not that there is no food; we have food. But people are hoarding and to do that successfully, you need chemical preservatives which are most times toxic for the grains and tubers that are being sold for consumption."

He called on the government to set up a market taskforce to check stores and shops where grains and crops are hoarded to discourage the practice.

An agricultural expert, Imam Toyin, who spoke to Daily Trust, blamed the incidents on hunger in the land, saying "people now eat anything that is available to them irrespective of how such food is processed or preserved."

"People use different chemicals to preserve food and when they got the market people just buy and eat without any form of checks", he said.

In a chat with Daily Trust, public health expert, Professor Oluwasogo Olalubi, said cassava poisoning is primarily caused by the consumption of cassava that contains high levels of cyanogenic glycosides that can release cyanide.

He said it is common in cassava lafun because it is in higher concentration than yam flour.

"The toxicant is in the cassava lafun that was over-fermented during the chain of production and also the unhygienic ways and methods of production and untidy environment are risk factors too", he added.

Agric workers blame importation of substandard



■ Minister of Health, Prof. Muhammad Ali Pate

Items

Speaking to Daily Trust, the Chairman of the Nigerian Union of Agriculture and Allied Employees (NUAA), David Kayode Ehindero, attributed the fatalities from food poisoning to importation of substandard food items.

"Food contamination is majorly caused by substandard imported foods, due to reduction in the agriculture production in Nigeria."

"The other reason is also due to over chemicalization of farms and products which is a direct effect of climate change. So, the government should do the needful", he urged.

FG warns against indiscriminate use of preservatives

A director at the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, who pleaded anonymity, told Daily Trust, that apart from the chemicals being used to preserve foods, there are certain varieties of cassava that are dangerous for human consumption, if not properly processed.

He said the ministry and the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) would continue to sensitise the public, especially farmers, grain sellers and consumers, on the indiscriminate use of chemicals to preserve foods.

How to prevent further casualties-NAFDAC

The coordinator of the NAFDAC for Kwara State, Nadabo Nathan, during a telephone chat with Daily Trust yesterday, advised citizens to enforce proper processing of cassava to avoid further casualties.

"Our role is to regulate

products that are processed and packaged, that is under our jurisdiction. However, for food that is produced locally, our role is advisory.

"This flour is from cassava and some can be poisonous. The method they use in processing it usually is by crushing, diluting and removing the water."

"So, they (citizens) should adequately dilute it enough and remove the water before processing it for eating. But when done in a hurry and the poisons couldn't be removed, it will not go down well with anybody that consumes it", he said.

Avoid expired products - NMA

The president of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Prof. Bala Audu, said it is very important, for people to avoid expired foods. He also said there was need for a pathology report to identify cause of each of the incidents.

He said this was important because there are many and diverse causes of such incidents. He said: "We need more information to be able to understand exactly what happened." He advised the public to imbibe the habit of consuming fresh foods or foods that they could eat within a short time rather than keeping them for long to expire and become injurious to the health.

He also advised members of the public to ensure foods are well cooked before consuming them. While saying that methods of food preservation and storage could also predispose people to food poisoning and deaths, he said ensuring good hygiene and food safety measures could also help protect against the incidents.