

# HEALTH & WELLBEING

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relaxing activity

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## When food becomes poison

BY OGECHUKWU AGWU

**R**oseline Joseph (not real name) won't forget the recent ordeal that landed her in the hospital after drinking expired milk. She had overlooked the fact that she was stooling much but attributed it to the fact that she was going to be on her menstrual period soon. Had it not been for her mother, "her saving grace" who found her unconscious in the toilet, she could be telling a different story now or no story at all, she never knew that the milk had expired and was poison.

In August 2011, six family members died in Gombi Local Government of Adamawa State, after eating *moinmoin*; a delicacy made from beans, it was suspected that the chemical used to preserve the beans was the cause of death. In June 2012, 26 people suffered from food poisoning at Yasharu village in Kafur Local Government Area of Katsina State. Many other Nigerians face this ordeal too, the question is how many of them have their "saving grace?"

Every year, over 200,000 Nigerians die from food poisoning,

these deaths are caused by factors such as improper processing and preservation. The World Health Organisation states in their report that 30 percent of people living in industrialised countries may suffer from food-borne illnesses each year. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that food-borne diseases cause about 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalisations, and 5,000 deaths each year. The annual cost of food-borne illnesses in the United States alone is estimated between 7.7 billion and 23 billion dollars.

Food poisoning is an illness caused by eating contaminated food or water, it can get contaminated during its stage of production, processing or cooking. In most cases of food poisoning, it is caused by bacteria such as *E. coli*, parasites and viruses; however, 99.9% of food borne illness is caused by unknown sources. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), unsafe food is linked to the deaths of an estimated two million people annually including children, food containing harmful bacteria, viruses, parasites or chemical substances is responsible for more than 200 diseases, ranging from diarrhea to cancers. In a statement released

ahead of World Health day, 2015, WHO said "new threats to food safety are constantly emerging, changes in food production, distribution and consumption, new and emerging pathogens, antimicrobial resistance - all pose challenges to national food safety systems. Increase in travel and trade enhance the likelihood that contamination can spread internationally."

Dr Chinwe Okafor, a medical personnel at Faith Living Hospital, Lagos, said that, "For a country as ours, hygiene plays a major role in the spread of food poisoning, most people don't bother to wash their hands with soap after visiting the toilets or even after returning from the market, school or church, they just delve into their food, thereby contaminating the food that they are about to eat. Living in a place that breeds insects such as, cockroaches, houseflies or rodents like rats that can readily carry germs to our food still boils to the hygiene." Apart from hygiene, food can be contaminated when they are not properly cooked, not correctly stored, leaving cooked food for too long at warm temperatures, not reheating food properly, the spread of bacteria between contaminated foods better known

as cross-contamination. As in the case of Roseline, eating expired food is another cause of food poisoning, it can also be caused by medicines in food and natural toxic substances such as poisonous mushrooms.

Certain foods are susceptible to food poisoning especially when they are not cooked, stored or handled properly, food like raw egg, meat, poultry and unpasteurized milk; processed and ready-to-eat food such as fish, meat, sandwiches fall in this category too.

Chinwe explained that "the symptoms of food poisoning usually includes feeling sick, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, weakness, fever, aching muscles, experiencing chills. One can start experiencing these symptoms within hours of eating contaminated food, and these symptoms may persist to a day or two."

"When these symptoms kick in, it is advised that such a person should rest and drink lots of water to prevent dehydration, because at this stage such a person would have been vomiting or stooling." Oral rehydration solution (ORS) is a solution that can be administered to any person that has suffered food poisoning to help alleviate the loss of fluid in the body.

"Being an illness caused by the consumption of food or water contaminated by toxic chemicals, bacteria, parasites or viruses, food poisoning can be prevented if Nigerians take the necessary precautionary measures like maintaining high standards of personal and food hygiene when handling, preparing and storing food." This according to her is part of what should be done to prevent food poisoning.

"Also Nigerians should learn to keep their kitchen clean by washing and cleaning cooking utensils to avoid cross-contamination; they should also learn to keep their surroundings clean and also fumigate the environment regularly."

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) recommends remembering the 'four Cs'; cleaning, cooking, chilling and cross-contamination, they also recommend that one to stick to the food's "use-by" date and the storage instructions on the packet. In line with this the WHO recommends five ways as guidance to vendors and consumers for handling and preparing food; keep clean, separate raw and cooked food, cook food thoroughly, keep food at safer temperatures and use safe water and raw materials.