

## **【Food Safety Overview】 Demystifying Incidents of Food-borne Disease Outbreak (Food Poisoning)**

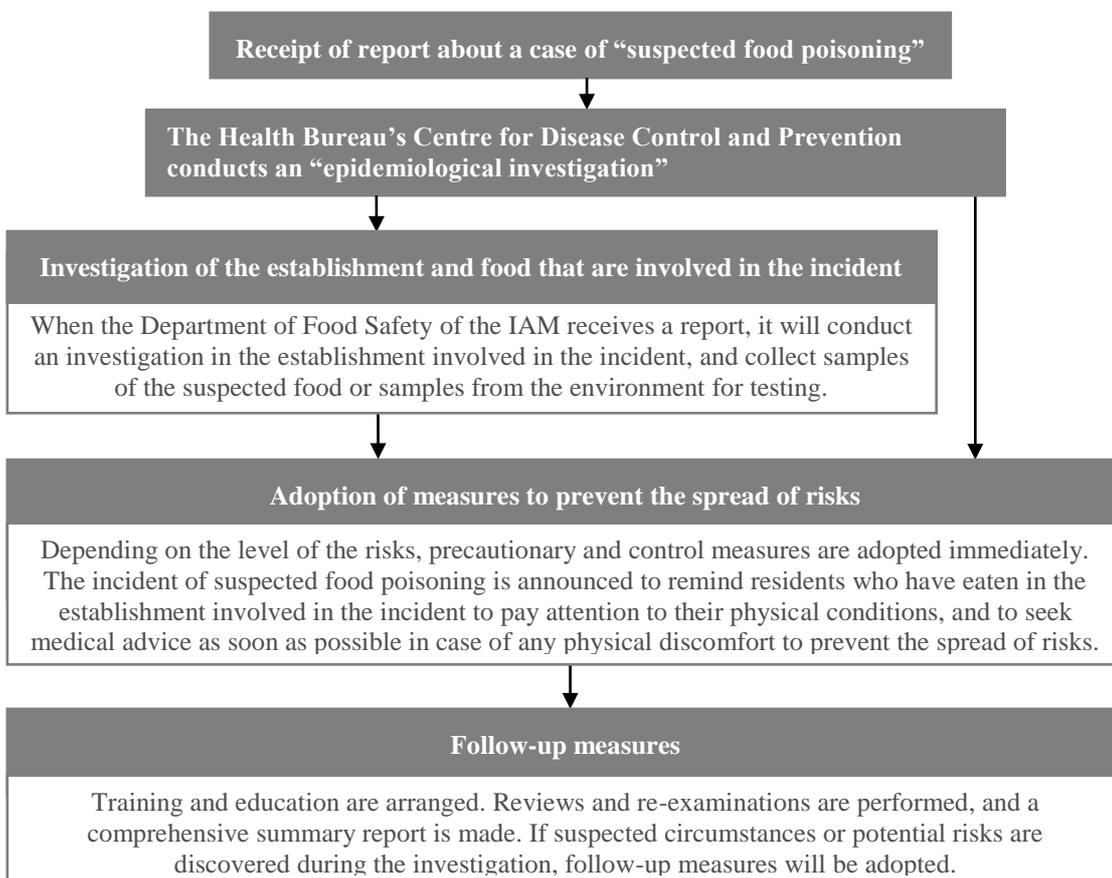
- **What is food-borne disease outbreak (food poisoning)? How is an incident determined as a suspected case of food poisoning?**

Food or water may be contaminated by various types of bacteria, viruses, parasites, and biological or chemical toxins. Food-borne disease outbreak (food poisoning) refers to a situation in which communicable or toxic diseases are contracted via consumption of food or drinks. Depending on the intake, the patients may display symptoms of gastrointestinal diseases like nausea, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, and vomiting, but other symptoms like fever and numbness can also develop. The incubation period can be from as short as a few minutes to a few days. After receiving reports of two or more people who suffer from similar physical symptoms after consuming the same food, the authorities will evaluate the case through “epidemiological investigation” to define the characteristics of this **suspected food poisoning incident**.

- **What should residents do if they feel discomfort after consumption of food?**

Once residents suffer from physical discomfort after consumption of food, showing symptoms which are similar to gastroenteritis, such as diarrhoea and vomiting, they should seek medical advice as soon as possible. If patients could provide medical staff with the information about their respective dietary histories in detail, the information given will help the authorities conduct an epidemiological investigation to analyse and focus on certain meals or food, in order to further investigate the cases and conduct follow-up actions. Information about dietary histories may involve questions such as **“When was the food consumed?”**, **“Where was the food consumed?”**, **“How many people consumed the food together and what were the types of food consumed?”**, **“About when did symptoms occur?”**, etc.

**Current procedure in which the authorities investigate and conduct follow-up on a case of suspected food poisoning:**



● **Details of the current procedure in which the authorities investigate and conduct follow-up on a case of suspected food poisoning are as follows:**

**1. Epidemiological investigation**

When medical institutions have found in the course of the diagnosis that two or more patients have eaten in the same establishment in a certain period of time in the past or that the physical discomfort came from eating the same type of food, the medical institutions will report it to the Health Bureau's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (hereinafter referred to as "the CDC"). The CDC will begin an "epidemiological investigation" based on the information provided by the medical institutions. The patients' vomit or excrement will be collected for further examination if possible. The medical institutions will report to the Department of Food Safety of the IAM to follow up on the hygiene conditions of the establishment and food. In addition, some cases of suspected food poisoning may be reported by residents to the Department of

Food Safety of the IAM directly, and subsequently the CDC will determine whether such incidents are cases of food poisoning.

## **2. Investigation on concerned establishment and food**

Having received the confirmation of a case of food poisoning from the Health Bureau, the Department of Food Safety of the IAM will send staff to the concerned establishment to conduct a food hygiene investigation. This includes collecting information about the hygiene of the environment and the food on site, requiring them to provide documents or hygiene certificates of the purchased goods, following up on the sources and conditions of the supply of the food suspected to be problematic, and collecting samples of the suspected food or environment for tests.

## **3. Adoption of precautionary and control measures**

The primary purpose of the investigation and sample collection mentioned above is to discover the potential risks and to adopt the appropriate corresponding measures. In addition, according to the “Food Safety Law”, the IAM will propose a series of precautionary and control measures depending on the level and the scope of the risks. Measures include requiring the food production and operation establishments to be closed for improvement, handling problematic food, and the issue of press releases to notify the public of the incident.

## **4. Continuous follow-up investigation and re-education**

The Department of Food Safety will interview the person(s) in charge of the establishment and urge the establishment concerned to arrange for their staff to attend the food hygiene supervisor and food safety & environmental hygiene basic course. This is to improve the hygiene practices of the staff members when handling food. Review and re-examination will also be conducted later on. When necessary, the investigation on the establishment and sample collection in the establishment will also be made more frequent.

## **5. Actions and responsibilities that should be taken by the establishment**

When the establishment receives a notification regarding the occurrence of a case of suspected food poisoning, they should cooperate with the staff of the authorities to conduct the investigation. They should also provide relevant

records and information such as receipts and invoices of the purchased goods, temperature control, and records on food supplies for the purpose of investigation. They should suspend the supply of the food suspected to have caused the food poisoning and destroy them. Upon the completion of the respective investigative works, they should conduct hygiene improvement works based on the suggestions given by the staff of the authorities.

- **Upon the receipt of a report on a case of suspected food poisoning, why should the Department of Food Safety follow up on the incident and notify the public as soon as possible?**

According to the competencies granted by the “Food Safety Law”, the Department of Food Safety is responsible for the dissemination of the relevant information and the conditions of handling food safety incidents based on the level of the food safety risks. Upon receipt of the report on a case of suspected food poisoning, the Department of Food Safety will conduct an investigation in the establishment. The staff of the Food Safety Centre will investigate aspects such as the dining area, the time of consumption, the number of people who consumed the food, the situation where the concerned food is served, and the clinical symptoms among others, according to the epidemiological data provided by the Health Bureau. The Department of Food Safety will also investigate the situation of the site, evaluate the incident, the degree and scope of the impact on local residents comprehensively, and issue press releases to inform the public as soon as possible. The announcement of the case of suspected food poisoning aims to remind residents to pay attention to food safety, to provide suggestions on hygiene, to remind patients with underlying medical conditions, and to prevent the spread of food safety issues.

- **Does a normal result of the sample testing on the food concerned imply that the food provided by the establishment is not the cause of food poisoning? How does the announcement of food poisoning incidents prevent the spread of food safety risks?**

The result obtained from the tests on food or the environment samples can serve as reference for epidemiological investigation. A result of sample testing showing no abnormalities does not imply that it is not possible for the food sold in the establishment concerned to be the cause of food poisoning. This is because the food samples collected are not collected from the same batch of food which the

patients consumed. In order to stop the spread of risks, the Department of Food Safety is obligated to make public the concerned establishment where food poisoning took place and to remind the residents who have eaten in the establishment concerned within the same time period to pay attention to their physical condition. If they also suffer from discomfort, they should seek medical advice as soon as possible and provide the medical staff with the information about their respective dietary histories, so that the medical staff can conduct a more detailed “epidemiological investigation”.

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