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Eating out? Watch out, bacteria on the loose

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Shigella, Salmonella or E.coli? Which bacteria would they be getting, is what would be running in the minds of Keralites as they order food from an eatery, whether dining in or ordering via an app.

This comes in the wake of a spate of suspected food poisoning cases in various parts of the state which last year got the second position at the national level in the State Food safety index, as part of World Food Safety Day.

Despite this honour, the inspections carried out by the Health department -- on account of the suspected food poisoning incident in Kasaragod -- has revealed that more than a thousand eateries across the state were unlicensed or unregistered and had hundreds of kilograms of unclean meat in their storages.

This would lead one to ask whether such inspections were carried out in the past and if yes, could it have prevented the Kasaragod incident where 16-year-old Devananda died and 58 others fell sick after consuming 'Shawarma' which health authorities later found out was contaminated with Shigella and Salmonella bacteria.

Shawarma is a Levantine dish containing thinly sliced pieces of marinated meat, like lamb, chicken or beef rolled into a flat bread.

Eating out is not often considered as a healthy option by many due to the manner in which the food is cooked -- like using too much oil, spices, salt or preservatives -- now there is the added danger of bacterial contaminants also being a part of the ingredients. Would this deter people from eating out? Would it make them think twice? The answer is yes for some.

Aswany S L, a banking professional in Pathanamthitta, said that she recently suffered from food poisoning after eating a vegetarian dish from a well-known hotel in Kollam and had to be hospitalised for 3-4 days before she got better. "I used to eat from outside a lot. Now, I am scared to do so," she said.

"Since I live in PG (paying guest) accommodation, I end up eating from outside at least once a day. But now I am worried about doing so," he said, but added that presently he has no other option.

However, the Kerala Hotels and Restaurants Association (KHRA) believes that the roadside or unlicensed eateries are to blame for such incidents and not the ones that are licensed.

The association's general secretary K P Balakrishna Poduval, speaking to PTI, said, "Hotels run by our members are licensed and therefore, they have to provide safe food else they stand to lose their licence. This is not the case with the roadside or unlicensed eateries."

While Shigella is one of the leading bacterial causes of diarrhea worldwide and is an intestinal infection caused by a family of bacteria, Salmonella infection affects the intestinal tract.