Contamination of food is greatest challenge for food safety in India: CSE

Food safety is the theme for the World Health Day in 2015. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 2 million people — 1.5 million of them children — die each year in the world due to diarrhoea from contaminated food and water; of the 2 million, nearly 70,000 die in South Asian countries alone. In 2002, about 10 percent of the deaths in India of children below 5 years were due to diarrhoea.

There is limited understanding of estimates of disease and deaths from all food-safety related issues. India also does not know the exact burden of all food-borne illnesses, points out Chandra Bhushan. CSE has, however, focused its attention on four key areas in the country that threaten the safety and quality of food in the country.

Use of pesticides

CSE researchers say pesticide use and management in India is largely unregulated and food contaminated with pesticide residues is freely used by unsuspecting consumers. Pesticides are linked to long-term health effects such as endocrine disruption, birth defects and cancer. Besides raw agriculture products, pesticide has been found in packaged food products such as soft drinks, bottled water and in human tissues in India. In India, unregistered pesticides are being used — and without maximum limits set on their use. The use is largely influenced by marketing initiatives of industry, said Bhushan.

Use of antibiotics

Indiscriminate use of antibiotics is non-therapeutic reasons such as growth promotion and mass disease prevention is a common practice in intensive industrialised farming settings in the country. Both residues of antibiotics and resistant bacteria can get transferred to humans through contaminated food. The problem of drug resistance linked with this problem further makes the food-borne illness difficult to treat. Most bacteria that cause food-borne illnesses such as E. coli, salmonella and campylobacter are already found to be multi-drug resistant in the country.

Street food and packaged food

While microbiological contamination of street food is a concern, its most common replacement is processed and packaged food which is laden with chemical additives. Long-term risks of many of these are not known. Besides chemical additives, ultra-processed junk foods are known to be high in salt, sugar and fats including trans-fats. Considering their established linkages with non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity and heart disease, it would be more appropriate to consider these foods as unsafe too.

World Health Day (April 7)

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What India needs to do

Implementation and enforcement of the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSS) needs to be strengthened: CSE believes an effective monitoring mechanism is the key to the success of Indian food safety regulatory framework. Limited capacity of enforcement authorities should not be a hindrance and should be augmented.

Also, financial and legal puns can and should be set in order to ensure deterrence. Procedures and practices of product approval, registration and licensing of food business operators should facilitate greater enforcement of the law of the land. Greater emphasis on imported food products is also required.

Food testing laboratory infrastructure and skills needs to be strengthened. With existing facilities being inadequate, a country-wide network of public and private laboratories with required infrastructure and skills for food testing is critical to the enforcement of food safety requirements. Besides, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) needs to build up on this going forward. It will also help in timely identifying and addressing a food-safety emergency.

Limits of chemicals or determinants of safe food need to be set: Science-based standards in line with international best practices for currently and newly identified chemicals should be set. For example, the FSSAI should set maximum residual limits for antibiotic residues in chicken and other food-producing animals. These should reflect therapeutic use only.

Antibiotics for growth promotion and mass disease prevention should be banned as countries, particularly in South Asia, presently manufacture and export antibiotics to other countries. The food industry in some cases of outbreaks, food product recalls, chemical food poisoning will be important going forward.

Policies to promote and make available good food: Domestic food and international trade need to be controlled and cheap availability of fresh, prepared food, fruits and vegetables in the country.