

What does the food handler in the home know about salmonellosis and food safety?

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Food-borne illness causes a significant burden of disease globally. The majority of confirmed cases of food-borne illness in Malta are caused by salmonellosis. Detailed case investigations by the Disease Surveillance Unit, Malta, revealed that most of the notified cases of infectious intestinal disease are most likely to be due to poor food safety practices in the home. Consumer awareness studies have shown that, in general, consumers are aware of the recommended food safety precautions, yet still adopt high-risk behaviours.

Three focus groups and a small case control group were formed to gather information on local consumer knowledge and attitudes towards safe food handling in the home. The responses from the three focus groups were analysed and grouped into general themes. The information obtained from these results was then used to plan a local food safety health promotion strategy.

The results show that individuals who had been exposed to salmonellosis, or who had a dependant who had been exposed, had developed a higher level of food safety knowledge and awareness. Variations between knowledge and self-reported practices make it apparent that persons have to be convinced that food safety measures are effective before they take action to change their behaviour.

In conclusion, consumer education strategies need to emphasise the burden of illness, making safe food handling meaningful to consumers. Continuous reinforcement of the messages may be effective in empowering the consumer to foster behaviour change.

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