

NOTE FOR THE PRESS

WEBSITE

1211 GENEVA 27 SWITZERLAND - TELEPHONE: 791.21.11 - CABLES: UNISANTE-GENEVE - TELEX: 415.416 - FAX: 791.07.46 - E-MAIL: inf@who.int

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WHO PUBLISHES GUIDANCE TO MINIMIZE TERRORIST THREATS TO FOOD

The World Health Organization (WHO) today published guidance intended to help national governments establish mechanisms which will minimize potential terrorists acts against food supplies. The document, entitled "Terrorist Threats to Food: Guidance for Establishing and Strengthening Prevention and Response Systems", is available at the following website: <http://who.int/fsf>.

According to WHO, foodborne agents may be responsible for up to 1.5 million deaths from diarrhoea-related conditions alone worldwide each year. In industrialized countries, such as the USA, one person in three may suffer from a foodborne disease annually. Major outbreaks of foodborne disease and related food safety emergencies are all too frequently reported, sometimes affecting hundreds of thousands of people and having enormous impact on trade. While only a few cases of intentional contamination of food have been proven, the risk of possible terrorist threats to food should be given serious consideration by public health authorities and the food industry.

The document examines means of establishing basic prevention, surveillance and response capacities. Because both unintentionally and deliberately caused outbreaks of foodborne disease may be managed by many of the same mechanisms, the WHO recommendations concentrate on working with national governments on integrating terrorism prevention and response measures into existing national food safety and disease surveillance programmes.

Preventive measures by governments and the food industry are discussed. Industry involvement is encouraged from the outset, as the food industry possesses the primary means and greatest ability to minimize food-related risks. Existing food safety management programmes can be enhanced, WHO says, while putting in place appropriate security measures to protect food production and distribution systems. The document provides suggestions for specific measures for consideration by industry.

The document provides guidance on strengthening existing communicable disease control systems to ensure that surveillance systems are sufficiently sensitive to meet the threat of any food safety emergency. It emphasizes that the establishment and strengthening of such systems will have a double benefit – not only will they help address the threat of food terrorism and other

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emergencies, they will also increase governments' capacity to reduce the increasing burden of foodborne illness.

The guidance document emphasizes the need to strengthen existing emergency alert and response systems by improving links with all relevant agencies and with the food industry. Many developed and most developing countries are not yet adequately prepared to deal with a large-scale food safety emergency. All countries should undertake preparedness and response planning to be able to cope with food safety emergencies regardless of their cause. In this regard, the services of various technical programmes of WHO as well as other organizations that may be of assistance to countries in addressing this newly emerging public health concern are also described in the document.

Experts from national agencies in Australia, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Russia, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States of America, and from organizations including the European Commission, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Industry Council for Development contributed to the development of the document. The document was prepared in collaboration with the WHO European Centre for Environment and Health.

The document is also available in written form by contacting the WHO Food Safety Department, c/o WHO, CH-1211 Geneva, Switzerland, fax (+41 22) 791 4807, e-mail foodsafety@who.int.

For further information please contact Dr Jorgen Schlundt, Food Safety, Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments, WHO, Geneva. Tel:(+41 22) 791 3345; Fax: (+41 22) 791 4807 E-mail: schlundtj@who.int; or contact the Communications Office, Director General's Office, Tel: (+41 22) 791 2222.

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