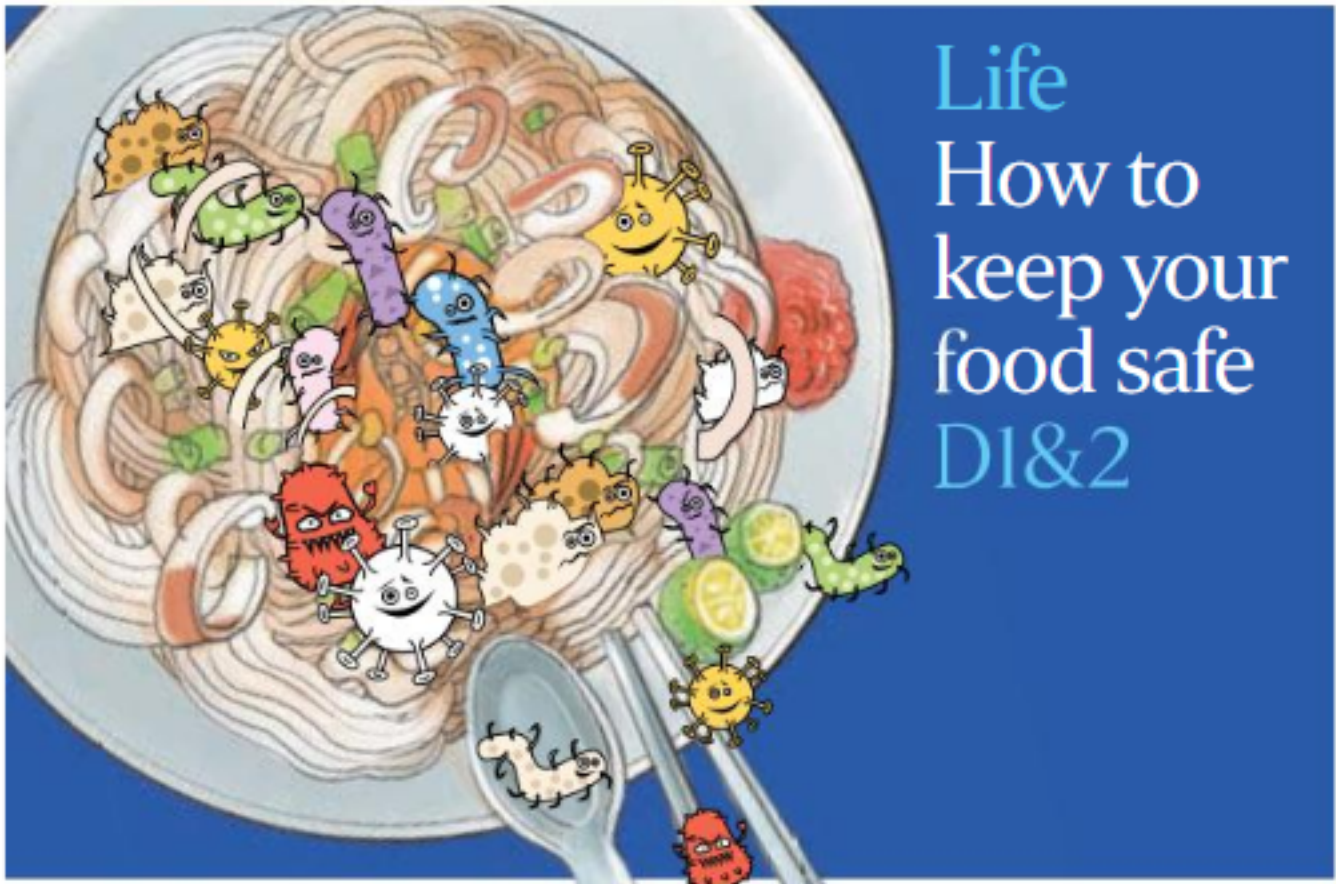
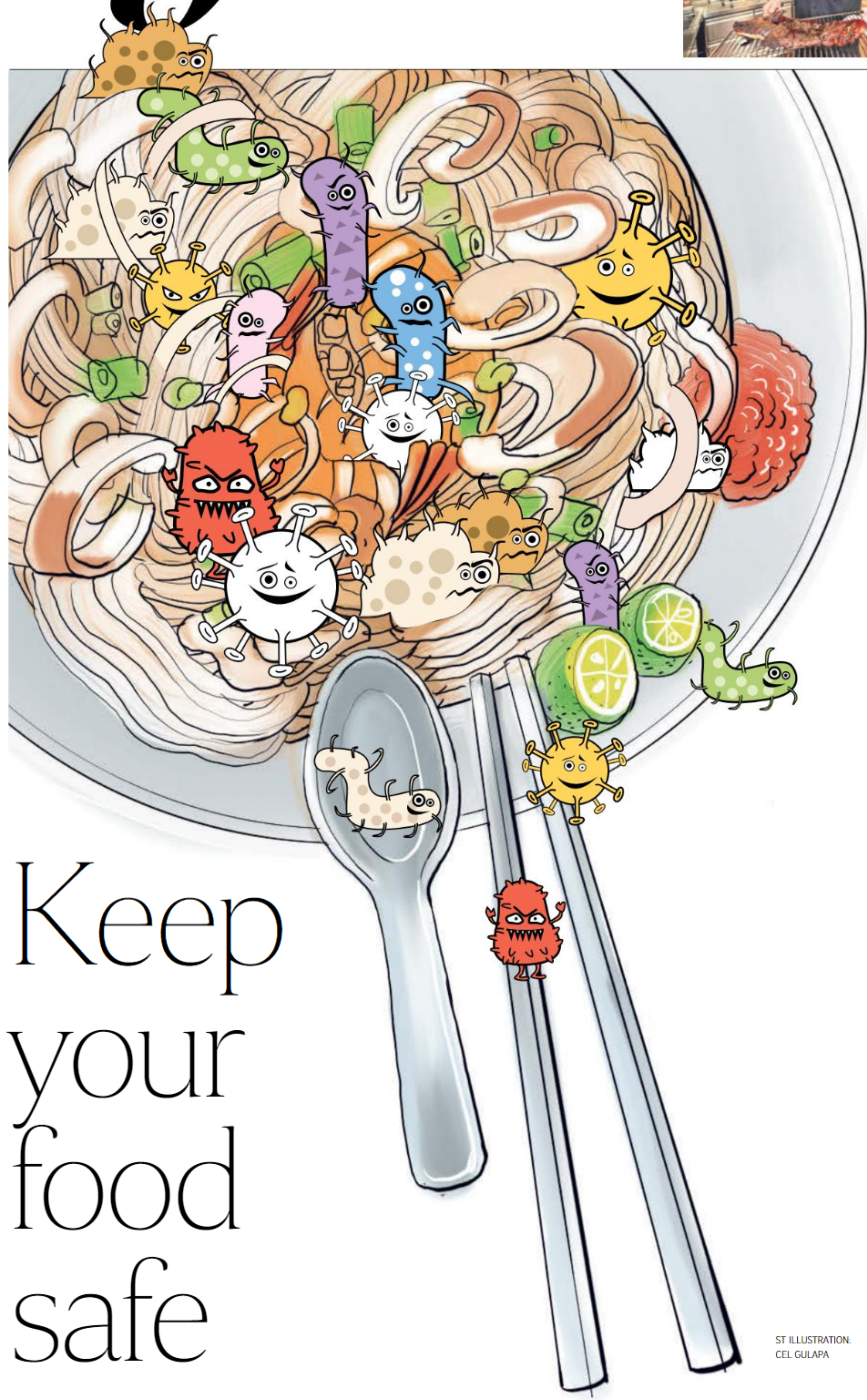




Life
How to
keep your
food safe
D1&2

life



Keep your food safe

Lower your risk
of getting food
poisoning with these
tips from experts



Joyce Teo

A recent spate of food poisoning cases has again put the spotlight on hygiene.

The latest incident involved 131 people – kindergarten 2 pupils and teachers – falling ill a week ago after eating meals prepared by FoodTalks Caterer & Manufacturer.

A few days earlier, 190 people became sick from food prepared by TungLok Catering, part of the TungLok restaurant group, at a Singapore Civil Defence Force event.

These incidents came after 81 people were struck ill – and one died – after eating bento boxes prepared by Spize Restaurant in River Valley for a Deepavali celebration.

In all, more than 400 people suf-

fered food poisoning in three separate incidents last month.

Food poisoning refers to a spectrum of food-borne infections of the gut by bacteria, viruses and even parasites such as worms.

“Most people associate food poisoning with vomiting and diarrhoea, but you can also have less specific symptoms such as fever, muscle aches, abdominal bloating, gas, cramps and discomfort,” said Dr Melvin Look, a director and a consultant surgeon specialising in gastrointestinal surgery at PanAsia Surgery.

The symptoms depend on the bug involved, he said.

“Acute symptoms can begin

within an hour of ingesting the contaminated food, but more subtle cases can take up to 10 days to manifest itself, by which time it may be difficult to pinpoint the exact source of the infection,” he added.

The ailment is very common, but some incidents can be minimised by taking more care with food preparation and storage at home.

The Straits Times asked experts to address 20 common questions on how to keep your food safe.

joyceteo@sph.com.sg

• With additional reporting by Felicia Choo

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Cannot finish your food? Store it quickly

Here are 10 questions you may have on how to store food safely.

1 Is it safe to keep cooked rice in a rice cooker overnight?

Some people keep leftover rice in the cooker with the lid tightly closed and power switched off and this results in the rice cooling slowly, said Mr Martyn Wong, manager of Singapore Polytechnic’s Food Innovation & Resource Centre. When the temperature in the cooker drops to 30 to 40 deg C, this is when the bacterium *Bacillus cereus* grows at its fastest rate, he added.

“As more and more of the bacteria grow, the amount of toxins in the food accumulates and this can result in food poisoning when the food is consumed.”

While all kinds of food can be susceptible to bacteria growth when left out at room temperature, *Bacillus cereus* is usually associated with rice, said Mr Wong. Its spores can survive even the cooking process, so rice should be stored quickly in the refrigerator if it is not meant for immediate consumption, he added.

If you must use “stale” or “day-old” rice for cooking fried rice, his advice is to cook the rice, spread it on a tray to cool quickly and place it in the fridge to keep it chilled.

It is not a good practice to reheat and chill rice more than once as the temperature fluctuations allow the multiplication of bacteria, which may lead to food poisoning.

2 What are some other foods that we should be mindful of leaving out at room temperature?

High-risk foods may include meat, seafood, dairy products and cooked food with sauce, said Professor William Chen, director of Nanyang Technological University’s food science and technology programme.

Bacteria thrive in watery environments, more so if it is a sauce with a high nutrient content, he added.

3 Can I keep leftovers in the fridge for a week?

This is not a good idea as leftovers kept in the fridge may still allow the slow growth of bacteria. So if the food is kept for a long period, it may have unsafe populations of bacteria, said Mr Wong.

“Leftovers should be kept in closed containers for no more than two days in the refrigerator and must be reheated such that they are steaming hot before consumption.”

4 Should cooked food be left to cool to room temperature before refrigerating or freezing it?

It may take a few hours to completely cool down the food, during which bacteria could breed.

National Environment Agency (NEA) guidelines suggest placing hot food into shallow dishes or distributing it into smaller portions for rapid, even cooling before refrigeration.

Foods not meant to be consumed within two hours of cooking should be promptly refrigerated, said Ms Agnes Ye, acting deputy director of the veterinary public health laboratory microbiology department at the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA).

5 Can cross-contamination happen in the fridge or freezer?

Yes. Refrigerating food will not get rid of the bacteria on it; the cold temperature only slows their growth.

Freezing also will not kill bacteria – it just renders them inactive. Once the food is thawed, the bacteria can become active.

To prevent cross-contamination, do not mix raw food with food that has been cooked, said Ms Ye.

Store raw meat and seafood at the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so that their juices do not drip onto other food, say NEA guidelines.

Cooking at temperatures of above 75 deg C will destroy most bacteria.

6 How do we know how long we can store certain foods?

There are guidelines you can refer to. For instance, those from the AVA state that you can store fresh eggs in the fridge for three to five weeks. Cooked fish can be stored in the fridge for three to four days or in the freezer for four to six months. Fresh beef, veal, lamb or pork can be kept for three to five days in the fridge or six to 12 months in the freezer.

7 Is it unsafe to refreeze food that has been thawed?

The AVA’s advice is to not refreeze meat that has been completely thawed in the refrigerator or meat that has been thawed in the microwave or in cold water.

However, Prof Chen said as long as the food was not thawed at and left in room temperature for hours, there is minimal safety risk to refreeze it, but repeated freezing may affect the taste and texture.

8 Can food that looks and smells fine be unsafe for consumption?

Food that looks and smells fine can be unsafe, said Prof Chen.

There are two functionally distinct groups of bacteria, one is implicated in food spoilage and the other in food poisoning. Consumers would not be affected by the bacteria in food spoilage, but more by those that can cause food poisoning. And this group of bacteria may not show any signs that will affect the food quality, said Prof Chen.

9 Can I store dried foods indefinitely?

Transfer dried foods that are bought loose or unused contents of opened packages of dried and preserved foods to airtight containers, said the AVA. Dried and preserved foods that will be kept for extended periods should be stored in packaging that does not allow air or water vapour to enter. This will prevent rancidity or mould from growing.

10 Is it safe to consume foods that have passed their use-by dates?

No. Use-by dates are about food safety, while best-before dates are about food quality.

Food can be eaten until the use-by date, but not after, according to the Food Standards Agency in Britain. A lot of foods, including meat and milk, can be frozen before the use-by date though, so plan ahead, it said.

The best-before date is not about safety. Food will be safe to eat after this date, but may not be at its best, the agency added, noting that its flavour and texture might not be as good.

Joyce Teo, with additional reporting by Rei Kurohi

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