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## **Handling and Hygiene Practices of Food Vendors in Rivers State University and Its Environment**

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study assessed handling hygiene practices of food vendors in Rivers State University and its environment. A survey research design was adopted for the study while the population consisted of food vendors who prepare and sell ready-to-eat foods in the study area. Snowball sampling technique was used for the study and a total of thirty food vendors constituted the sample size for the study. A self-assessment form was used for data collection and data analyzed with frequency, percentages and Pearson's correlation. The result showed that majority of the food vendors had no access to portable water and the operating environment untidy. Most (60%) of the food vendors appeared clean and 70% of them use personal protective clothing while 70% and 97% of them handled foods and money with bare hands while serving food. Storage of cooked food was properly kept in covered containers by 70% of the vendors while 60% of the vendors did not separate raw and cooked foods. Seventy seven (77) percent of vendors did not keep cold foods in refrigerators or ice boxes as to maintain the temperature of the food. Only 40% of the food vendors covered unused utensils while 57% of them did not clean utensils properly after use. The study found out that all the food vendors washed utensils with cold soapy water and 90% of the vendors re-used water for washing utensils.

*Keywords: Handling; hygiene; practice; food vendor; street food.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Street foods are ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and sold by vendors in streets and similar public places. Consumption of street foods has increased in most urban areas due to the demands of urban life and limited time. Street foods now constitute a significant part of the urban food supply in most countries [1]. It is believed that street foods have nutritional components of an unhealthy diet and a higher risk of contamination by physical, chemical and biological agents which have become a serious concern in terms of food safety [2]. However, due to the increased demand for street foods, more persons are engaging in the business most of whom are not knowledgeable in the basic principles of handling such foods.

Food vendors ease access to ready-to-eat foods for the busy individuals who may not be able to prepare their meals at home [3]. They usually congregate in crowded areas where there are large numbers of potential customers [4].

These areas usually have little or no basic sanitary facilities. Thus it is common to find food vendors within educational institutions due to the large population of students and staff. These students depend greatly on these food vendors for their meals as there are restrictions on cooking in the hostel for safety reasons in addition to little or no time for meal preparation.

The quality and safety of ready-to-eat foods available in educational institutions is important because it could negatively affect the health of the students which make up a large proportion of the consumers. The safety of these foods depends greatly on the handling and hygiene practices of the vendors. The World Health Organization [5] reported that food handling personnel play important role in ensuring food safety throughout the food chain from production and storage to consumption. Foods can become contaminated during preparation, post preparation and storage as well as during service prior to consumption.

The consumption of street foods is inevitable thus it is necessary to ensure the safety of these foods and reduce contamination. To achieve this, the World Health Organization developed preventive measures tagged "Golden rules for safe food preparation" as to enhance food safety [6]. These rules include amongst others thorough cooking of food, maintaining appropriate

temperature of cooked food, re-heating stored food, avoiding contact between raw and cooked food and protection of food from insects, rodents and other animals.

Despite these rules food borne diseases continue to be a serious public health problem in developing countries [7]. Poorly prepared and packaged street vended foods have been identified in many countries as the cause of food borne diseases [8]. Most street food vendors are ignorant and untrained in food hygiene and basic food safety rules [9]. Although some are knowledgeable on these safety measures, they do not adhere to the rules thereby predisposing the consumers to several health risks. Improper handling and disregard for hygienic measures on the part of the food vendors could lead to contamination of the food by pathogenic bacteria which are capable of causing illness in the consumers [10].

The adherence to basic hygiene and food safety measures by food vendors is therefore of utmost importance particularly in educational institutions. Failure to do so could result in food poisoning and other food borne diseases. Thus the need to assess the food handling and hygiene practices of food vendors in Rivers State University.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a survey research design and was conducted in Rivers State University and its environs. The population for the study consisted of food vendors who prepare and sell ready-to-eat foods within the premises of the University and its environs – the University main gate, hostel blocks and the Azikiwe (back gate). Vendors who sell pre-packaged and packaged foods were not included in the population of the study. These areas were included in the population of the study because large numbers of students patronize the food vendors in these areas. There was no official data on the population of food vendors in the study area. Thus Snow-ball sampling technique was used for the study. Using this sampling technique, a total of thirty food vendors were contacted and constituted the sample size for the study. Data on the type of facilities used for vending food, environment around food vending stalls, personal hygiene of the food vendors, food storage practices and handling and care of utensils by the food vendors was collected by observing the food vendors using a self-assessment/observation form designed with two

responses: yes and no. The collection of data by observation was based on the findings of Beleya et al., [3] who reported remarkable variations in the reported hygiene practices and observed hygiene practices of food vendors. The data collected from the observations were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages.

### 3. RESULTS

Table 1 showed the facilities used by the various food vendors. About 60% of the vendors constructed their stalls with canopies, 30% of the vendors used wooden tables and 10% used wheel barrows as food stall.

**Table 1. Facilities used for vending food**

Facilities	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Canopies	18	60
Wooden tables	9	30
Wheel barrows	3	10

Table 2 presented the hygiene situation around food vending stalls. Majority (83%) of the stalls were not protected from the sun, wind and dust, 50% were free from pests, flies and animals, 50% were free from pests, flies and animals.

**Table 2. Environment around food vending stalls**

Environment	Yes		No	
	(Frequency)	(%)	(Frequency)	(%)
Stall are properly protected from sun, wind and dust	5	17	25	83
Free from pests, flies and animals	15	50	15	50
Access to potable water	6	20	24	80
Adequate hand washing facilities available	0	0	30	100
Availability of food waste disposal facilities	10	33	20	67
Food vendors bins are properly closed	2	7	28	93
Access to waste water disposal sites	5	17	25	83
Stalls are situated far from refuse/waste disposal sites	5	17	25	83
Stalls are situated far from open drains	17	57	13	43

**Table 3. Personal hygiene practices of the food vendors**

Parameter	Yes		No	
	(Frequency)	(%)	(Frequency)	(%)
Proper hand washing before handling foods	11	37	19	63
Clean and presentable clothes	18	60	12	40
Use of personal protective clothing	21	70	9	30
Handle foods with bare hands	21	70	9	30
Short and clean nails	25	83	5	17
Hair covered while serving food	5	17	25	83
Handle money with bare hands while serving food	29	97	1	3
Serve food wearing jewelries	9	30	21	70
Blow nose into hands and proceeds to work	24	80	16	20
Do not wash hands after coughing	21	70	9	30

Only 20% of the food vendors had access to potable water and none of the vendors had adequate hand washing facilities. Thirty three (33) percent of the food vendors had waste disposal facilities and only 7% of them had their waste bins properly closed. Seventeen (17) percent of the food vendors had access to waste water disposal sites and were situated far from refuse/waste disposal sites and 57% of the food vendors were situated far from open drains.

The personal hygiene practices of the food vendors are presented in Table 3. Results showed that 37% of the vendors washed hands properly before handling foods, while 60% of the vendors wore clean and presentable clothes and 70% of them used personal protective clothing. Seventy (70%) percent of the food vendors handled foods with bare hands, 83% of them had short and clean nails and only 17% of the food vendors covered their hair while serving food. Almost all (97%) of the food vendors handled money with bare hands while serving food, 30% wore jewelries and 80% of the vendors blew their nose into hands and proceeded to work. Majority (70%) of the food vendors did not wash hands after coughing.

The food storage practices of the food vendors are presented in Table 4. Result of the present study showed that 30% of the vendors kept their foods open in stalls while 70% kept their foods in covered containers. About 40% of the food vendors separated raw foods from partially cooked and cooked foods. Few (23%) vendors maintained the temperature of cold foods by refrigerating or keeping in ice boxes and most (70%) of them stored hot foods in coolers to maintain the temperature of hot foods.

Table 5 showed the various ways food vendors handled and care for utensils. Data analysis showed that 40% of the food vendors covered unused utensils properly, 43% of the vendors cleaned their utensils properly after use. All the food vendors washed their utensils with cold water and soap and only 17% washed utensils with cold water without soap.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The type of facility or equipment used for vending food is important as it could affect the wholesomeness of the ready-to eat food. The use of canopies by majority (60%) of the food vendors and wooden tables by some of the food vendors could be a source of contamination to the food. Dust and other particles that settle on the canopies can easily come in contact with the food. The wooden tables used if not properly cleaned and disinfected could become breeding ground for microorganism which could later gain access find themselves into the food. Wood is

not a suitable material for food contact surface as cleaning is not easy. Food contact surfaces should be smooth, free of cracks and crevices, non-porous, non-absorbent, non-contaminating, non-reactive, corrosion resistant, durable, maintenance free and cleanable Kirabira et al. [11]. The use of these types of facilities by the food vendors could be for easy accessibility by the consumers. Buted and Ylagan [12] also noted that street food vendors are usually located outdoors or under a roof which is easily accessible from the street.

The environment where food is prepared and sold is important and contributes to the safety of the food. The findings of the study revealed that majority of the food vendors operate in places that are not properly protected from sun, wind and dust and do not have access to potable water. Most of the food vendors do not have adequate hand washing and waste disposal facilities and were situated close to waste disposal sites. This contributed to the infestation of most of the food vending stalls with insects, pests and animals as revealed in the study. The unhygienic environment where these food vendors operate coupled with lack of potable water and hand washing facilities poses a great risk to the health of the consumers. The findings of the study are in agreement with that of Dajaan et al. [13] who reported that 91% of the food vendors had no running water in their place of selling. Alamo-Tonelada et al. [14] reported that most of the respondents vended foods in clean environment with the presence of waste bins.

**Table 4. Food storage practices of the food vendors**

Parameter	Yes		No	
	(Frequency)	(%)	(Frequency)	(%)
Foods are kept open in stalls	9	30	21	70
Foods are kept in covered containers	21	70	9	30
Raw, partially cooked and cooked food are kept separate	12	40	18	60
Cold foods are refrigerated or kept in ice boxes to maintain temperature	7	23	23	77
Hot foods are stored in coolers to maintain temperature	21	70	9	30

**Table 5. Handling and care of utensils by food vendors**

Parameter	Yes		No	
	(Frequency)	(%)	(Frequency)	(%)
Unused utensils are well covered	12	40	18	60
Utensils are cleaned properly after use	13	43	17	57
Utensils are washed with warm soapy water	0	0	30	100
Utensils are washed with cold soapy water	30	100	0	0
Utensils are washed with dirty cold soapy water	27	90	3	10
Utensils are washed with clean water with no soap	5	17	25	83

Observing personal hygiene is vital for any food establishment as human beings are a major source of food contamination [15]. Although most of the food vendors appear clean, use personal protective clothing and maintained short clean nails, other hygiene practices assessed were generally poor. Most of the food vendors do not wash their hands properly and between tasks, handled foods with bare hands and handled money while serving food. Hands of food vendors are usually a means of transmitting pathogens from contaminated places and items and could result in cross contamination when in contact with food. Thus, hand washing is one of the precautionary measures to protect against the spread of diseases and to reduce cross contamination. The unhygienic practices of the food vendors make them potent source of cross-contamination. Poor personal hygiene of food vendors has been reported by Ntow et al., [16] and Umar et al., [17].

Cooked food can become contaminated due to improper handling and inappropriate temperature control. Most of the vendors keep cooked food in covered containers and in coolers to retain the temperature of hot foods whereas cold foods are kept at ambient temperatures. Most (60%) vendors do not separate raw foods from partially cooked and cooked foods. Cold foods such as fruits and salads should be refrigerated. Storing foods at ambient temperature falls below the recommended storage conditions and has high chances of spoilage due to bacterial growth that could compromise microbial quality and cause illness to consumers [18].

Most (60%) food vendors do not cover unused utensils and used ones were not cleaned properly after use. Majority (90%) of the vendors used dirty water for washing their utensils. This is expected as 80% of the food vendors did not have access to potable water. Our results are consistent with the findings of Hilario [19] and Dajaan et al. [13] who reported that most food vendors carried water from their homes due to unavailability of portable water at their place of operation. The use of dirty soapy water could result in a public health risk as dirt from the water and chemicals from the soap which were not thoroughly rinsed off can come in contact with the food. Besides the use of contaminated raw materials and poor personal hygiene, food contamination can also emanate from ineffective cleaning and sanitation of food contact surfaces [20]. Baluka et al. [21] reported inadequate

hygiene and food handling equipment as most facilities had sinks with no soap.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the handling and hygiene practices of the food vendors in the study area is unhygienic and below international standards. The hygiene practices of the food vendors could result in contamination of the food and consequently disease outbreaks. The Institution's management in conjunction with public health authorities should increase awareness on the threats of poor food handling and hygiene practices on the health of the consumers. Vending sites with basic facilities such as potable water should also be provided for the food vendors. Further studies should also be conducted to assess the food safety and hygiene knowledge of the food vendors.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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