

SINGAPORE

Poor nutrition in foreign workers' catered meals: Study

By Kelly Ng, TODAY
POSTED: 19 Mar 2015 23:30

TODAY reports: Foreign workers in Singapore are receiving catered meals that usually consist of just rice and tinned meat or curry, and the food is delivered so early that by meal time, they would have gone bad, according to a study.

PHOTOS



CAPTION

SINGAPORE: Foul-smelling curry, rock-solid fish with scales still intact, and roti prata so hard that it feels like one is "chewing on plastic" — these are how some foreign workers describe the food catered for them at work sites.

The situation is made worse by the fact that the meals are often delivered several hours before meal times. Construction supervisor Zakir Hossain Khokan told TODAY: "If you come by construction sites or shipyards early in the morning, you will see how packs of food are left along the roadside. By the time workers have their meals, often the plastic bags would have been broken (by cockroaches or rats). The food is so smelly it has obviously gone bad."

The poor nutrition of meals catered for foreign workers, which can cost as much as a quarter of a worker's monthly salary, is the subject of an ongoing study by researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and HealthServe, a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

FOOD DELIVERED HOURS BEFORE MEAL TIME

Based on interviews and focus groups with about 60 Bangladeshi workers living in the Tai Seng area, the researchers found that the meals — usually a pile of rice and some tinned meat or curry — are often delivered hours in advance.

"Breakfasts and lunches are delivered to workers' dormitories as early as 6am. By lunch time, the food smells rancid," said Mr Manishankar Prasad, a researcher from NUS' Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation. The meals are also sorely lacking in nutrition value, and some workers often complain of stomach problems, he added.

According to some foreign workers interviewed by TODAY, their packed meals do not come with time stamps. The National Environment Agency (NEA) requires caterers to provide time stamps with their packed food, indicating when the food was cooked and when to consume it by. NEA recommends that cooked food kept under temperatures of between 5 and 60 degrees Celsius be consumed within four hours of preparation.

Caterers said that breakfasts and lunches are delivered to construction work sites as early as 5am, and dinner at 5pm.

A spokesman for Aysha Catering said the caterer provides time stamps but he noted that once the food is delivered, it is up to the employers when they want their workers to consume it. He added that the meals are cooked by 3am. While it provides employers the option of separate deliveries for breakfast, lunch and dinner, they usually do not take up the option as it would cost S\$50 more per person, the spokesman said.

NGOs working with foreign workers said catered food is a perennial complaint. Ms Debbie Fordyce, an executive member at Transient Workers Count Too, said: "The men complain about lack of protein, expired ingredients, and spoiled food. Men arrive in fairly good health, lose weight when they start working — a result of the hard work and long days as much as the food."

EATING OUT IS 'TOO EXPENSIVE'

Mr A K M Moshin, editor-in-chief of local Bengali newspaper Banglar Kantha which champions the rights of Bangladeshi workers in Singapore, said that there are no cooking facilities in many dormitories. "Employers and dormitory management urge the workers to eat the catered food," he said.

Mr Akhlas Sakar said that it would be too expensive for him and his fellow construction workers to buy their own meals. "Eating outside costs S\$5 to S\$6 a meal. Where I can get so much money? If I spend all my wages to eat good food then my family back at home will go without food," he said.

Nevertheless, a worker, who declined to be named, he said would buy food on his own on most of the days as he ends up throwing away the catered meals. Foreign construction workers whom TODAY spoke to said they pay more than S\$100 a month to have catered meals three times a day.

Construction worker Mohd Zahirul Islam said his weight dropped from 70kg to 55kg after living on catered food for three years. In 2011, he switched employers so that he could stay at a dormitory where he could cook his own meals. He has since put on about 10kg, he said.

Nevertheless, some workers noted that the cooking facilities at the dormitories are insufficient. Mr Sromik Monir said he has to wait in line for as long as 1.5 hours to use the cooking equipment. "Sometimes we finish work at 9pm. We won't sleep enough if we cook," he said.

Employers TODAY spoke to said meal arrangements vary according to the location of work sites and the size of the company.

Sharing his company's good practices, Mr Desmond Hill, deputy general manager of Penta Ocean construction, said his firm usually delivers food to work sites an hour before meal times. Where possible, it also sets up quarters on site where workers can cook, he added.

An industry insider who wanted to be known only as Mr Lim said some caterers are offering cheaper packages and cut back on the quality and quantity of the food.

Holland-Bukit Timah GRC Member of Parliament Christopher de Souza, who has spoken up for foreign workers' welfare in Parliament, hopes the situation can be addressed. He said: "I hope the workers who give up much to support their families in their hometowns will be provided healthy meals to sustain them through a hard day's work."

-TODAY/xq