

# Pandemics rarely originate from food chain - expert

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Abu Dhabi: An epidemic like swine flu does not generally originate from the food chain, but unexpected chemical contaminations are always a challenge to food security and food safety officials cannot afford to be complacent, an Irish expert told Gulf News on Monday.

Alan Reilly, Deputy Chief Executive of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, was speaking on the sidelines of the GCC Risk Analysis Work Shop, which was inaugurated by Dr Rashid Ahmad Bin Fahd, UAE Minister of Environment and Water.

The **Abu Dhabi Food Control Authority (ADFCA)** is hosting the two-day work shop at Hilton Abu Dhabi.

Food safety officials cannot be complacent as there is always a possibility of new pathogens striking, Reilly said. "You have things& antibiotic resistance developing, chemicals turning up in food cycle& like melamine in dairy products. A few years back you never knew of such things."

Melamine contamination in milk caused the death of many children in China recently.

Generally, viruses in the food are killed if it is properly cooked so people do not need to worry about epidemics from the food chain, Reilly explained.

Food-borne microbes affect the digestive system whereas influenza viruses affect the respiratory system, he pointed out.

Reilly said: "In the food chain, the problems are limited to small outbreaks of diseases, but massive outbreaks like pandemics which spread from individuals to individuals are rare.

"Moreover, you can remove the problematic food items from the market in such situations, but you cannot remove the people from the community [during the outbreak of an epidemic], he said.

Asked if organic farming can minimise such risks, Reilly said: "If you don't look at the possibility of contamination, organic farming alone does not help". He made it clear that risk management is important even for organic food items.

Harmonised efforts on the basis of scientific advice are essential in the Gulf region for risk management in food safety.

"Steps like banning the import of problematic products and closing down outlets should be based on scientific opinion," he said. "We have done it in Europe - at the European Food Safety authority - which minimises the efforts of individual countries," Reilly said.

According to Reilly, swine flu is a misnomer because its exact origin [whether it originated from pigs] is not known. The name stuck because the virus is similar to one seen in swine at one stage, he explained.

"It seems it originated from Mexico, but how and from where are not clear. There were no sick swine, but sick people in Mexico," Reilly said.

(Zawya)