

# HOW SAFE IS THE FOOD YOU EAT IN KAMPALA RESTAURANTS?

From fast-food joints to roadside vendors, a disturbing trend has emerged: Poor hygiene, questionable cooking methods and the use of harmful additives. What really happens behind the scenes of your favourite restaurant? How clean are the kitchens? Where do the ingredients come from? Is the food you eat every day safe? From cooking with toxic plastic bags to unsanitary preparation areas and the rampant use of dangerous chemicals, Ibrahim Ruhweza delves into the shocking truth about food safety in Kampala



In several parts of Kampala, some restaurant owners cook food in polyethylene bags, exposing consumers to hazardous chemicals

**K**ampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) records show that Kampala has 2,300 operational restaurants as of 2025. Central Kampala has 686, Kawempe 265, Makindye 603, Nakawa 460 and Rubaga 286.

Dr Sarah Zalwango, the head of public health at KCCA, says they are inspected prior to licensing and routinely afterwards.

"Routine inspections for 2025 found 59% of restaurants meeting standards, while the remaining needed improvement."

This means about 41% of restaurants are not properly regulated or inspected.

Henry Kaula, the manager of the health inspectorate at KCCA, acknowledges that while some food vendors operate legally, many run illegal businesses.

"KCCA has only seven health educators per division, making effective enforcement difficult given the high number of food operators. Each division has hundreds of vendors, many located in places not meant for food businesses, such as near filthy trenches with stagnant water," he says.

Kaula notes that local leaders and the public often defend illegal vendors instead of



supporting enforcement efforts.

"People need to understand that when we stop someone from selling food near a trench, we are protecting them from an outbreak," he said.

## A MAN AND HIS DIRTY DISH

On December 24, 2025, a man only identified as Patrick made a stop at the restaurants behind Link Bus Terminal at Kisenyi suburb in Kampala. He wanted to eat before embarking on a long journey from Kampala to Nyahuka, Bundibugyo district.

Patrick ate *katogo* made of matooke, offals and greens, accompanied by a glass

of juice. He did not feel any stomach upset immediately, only the satisfaction he wanted. It was his first meal of the day.

An hour later, his stomach began to grumble. He tried to ignore it, but soon, he got the urge to use the toilet.

"By that time, we had reached Mubende. I begged the conductor to speak to the driver to make a stop. After the vehicle stopped, I paid sh500 for toilet service, but I still felt very sick and could not continue the journey. I was helped to a clinic and then admitted for two days as I received treatment," Patrick narrates.

The diagnosis was food poisoning. Patrick is sure the restaurant where he ate before boarding the bus was the culprit. Stories like Patrick's are quite many.

Gilbert Kambudye, a phone dealer at Mutaasa Kafeero Plaza, says he avoids restaurant food due to frequent stomach pains and vomiting he has experienced.

"Since last year, I only eat home-made meals," he says.

As for Jaqueline Kirabo, she trusts hotel food more than what street vendors produce, although even high-end restaurants sometimes serve poorly cooked meals.

## SURVEY

This reporter investigated restaurants alongside a mini-survey on customers' awareness of food safety. The results revealed that many people are unaware of the health risks associated with the food they eat daily.

In most restaurants visited, hygiene was largely neglected, with food preparation methods that raised serious concerns.

Of the 50 people asked whether they were aware of the hygiene of the food they eat, 35 were not aware and did not want to know, five cared deeply about hygiene and 10 were undecided.

Among the 50 sampled food operators, 40 restaurants were located close to trenches, making hygiene a gamble despite their claims.

The six roadside restaurants appeared hygienic from the front, but the situation behind them told a different story. Only four restaurants made efforts to maintain hygiene, though they struggled with flies and selling cold food.

The 100 restaurants and customers sampled represent broader behaviours.



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Poor hygiene puts many customers' health in jeopardy. The survey was conducted in the new and old taxi parks, City Abattoir, Ggaba, Kansanga, and Nsambya.

### ALARMING FOOD PREPARATION PRACTICES

In several parts of Kampala, including Kansanga, Makindye and Ggaba, the reporter found some restaurant owners boiling milk in polyethylene bags (*buveera*). This dangerous practice that causes hazardous chemicals to leach into food, according to health experts, extends to other foods such as matooke, posho, millet bread, cassava and Irish potatoes.

A young boy working at one of the restaurants said plastic bags are used to control portions and minimise wastage. However, neither he nor his mother is aware of the severe health risks associated with this method.

Beyond the use of plastic, hygiene conditions in many fast-food outlets were shockingly poor.

At Ggaba landing site, fish and vegetable leftovers are dumped into the lake, creating breeding grounds for flies and other insects. The same water is used to wash plates, tomatoes, onions and salads. These food items are later served to unsuspecting customers. Some individuals even defecate and urinate in the lake, hence worsening the contamination.

### YOUR FOOD, YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

Many Kampala residents admitted they rarely consider where their food is prepared. Olga Mofasha, a mother of two dining by the Gaba lakeside, noted that most food vendors prioritise profits over consumer health.

"Home-cooked meals are often safer because hygiene can be monitored," she emphasised.

A major concern is that waiters handle money while simultaneously serving food and washing plates, increasing the risk of cross-contamination. In small restaurants, plates are often stored in unhygienic conditions, further exposing customers to infections.

Augustus Tuhaise, the proprietor of Fig Tree Restaurant in Kansanga parish, says customers have a responsibility to choose where they eat. He notes that a restaurant's location often determines hygiene levels, including its distance from washrooms.

Tuhaise adds that food consistency is key: "In most cases, the taste of your food should remain the same. When it keeps fluctuating, you should have some doubts."

### HEALTH EXPERTS WEIGH IN

Dr Hilder Koriang, the managing director of Health Connect, a tele medicine and mobile health company, points out that many small restaurants operate near open trenches, exposing food to dust and bacteria. Consumers risk food poisoning, ulcers and other illnesses due to these unsanitary conditions.

Dr Max Ojangole Igune, a nutritionist at Hunger Fighters Uganda, emphasises that food safety largely depends on its source. Many street vendors prepare food at home under unknown conditions before selling

# ARE YOU EATING YOURSELF TO AN EARLY GRAVE AT THAT FOOD OUTLET?



A food joint in Kampala. Last year, *Weekend Vision* reported that some Kampala food vendors were using transformer oil to fry chips and fish

## REGULATORY ENFORCEMENT

Prof. Charles Muyanja from Makerere University's department of food technology and nutrition, says most Kampala restaurants prioritise profit over safety. Many owners hire untrained staff to cook and serve, compounding food safety risks.

He highlights that small restaurant spaces often lead to cross-contamination.

"For example, the same knife used to cut raw meat may also be used to chop vegetables, spreading bacteria. Without proper food safety education, many consumers unknowingly put themselves at risk."

"Despite Uganda's free market economy allowing anyone with capital to open a food business, authorities have failed to hold vendors accountable," Muyanja adds.

He says many small restaurants operate in congested areas, some near sewage pipes carrying waste. This exposes customers to waterborne diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and typhoid.

Mujanja stresses that bacteria from sewage channels can evaporate into the air, contaminating food and leading to severe health consequences.

Dr Paul Kasenene, a specialist in nutrition and lifestyle medicine, believes Uganda urgently needs a national food authority to regulate the sector.

He suggests establishing an oversight body similar to the National Drug Authority, which monitors pharmaceutical sales.

"This would help eliminate unscrupulous food dealers and improve public health standards."

it to hungry passersby. Without proper temperature control, germs thrive, making street food a potential health hazard.

Igune warns about snacks such as chapatti, rolex and mandazi sold on highways, which often cool down and attract bacteria. Some vendors even wrap them in plastic, exposing consumers to toxic chemicals.

Additionally, many restaurants use harmful cooking practices. Reports indicate that some add drugs such as paracetamol to beans and meat to ready them quickly, unknowingly endangering consumers.

### LINK TO CANCER

Data from the Uganda Cancer Institute shows that approximately 33,000 people are diagnosed with cancer annually, with only 7,400 accessing proper medical care. Experts argue that unsafe food is a leading contributor to these alarming statistics.

Dr Noleb Mugisha, a head of community cancer institute services from the Uganda Cancer Institute, says when cooking oil is recycled, it changes its chemical composition due to over burning.

He says over burnt cooking oil turns into trans fat, which is hard to be metabolised and this leads to high blood pressure. This means if you eat at questionable restaurants, diarrhoea is not the only thing you should be worried about. A restaurant that has questionable hygiene will use the same oil employed in frying chips, chicken and fish, to make soups.

Last year, *Weekend Vision* reported that some Kampala food vendors were using transformer oil to fry chips and fish. This toxic, recycled oil is highly carcinogenic, yet

some vendors prefer it due to its low cost.

Many unsuspecting customers continue consuming such hazardous food, unaware of the long-term health risks.

In their research titled: *Recycled Cooking Oils Used For Street Foods in Kampala: Quality and Recycling Frequency*, Okalany, E., Byakika, S., & Mukisa, I. M. (2024) found that deep-frying oils degrade when repeatedly heated and form hazardous compounds (such as trans fatty acids, free radicals, toxins) that are absorbed into foods and have been associated with increased risks of cancers and other health problems in humans. They conclude that recycled cooking oils used by street food vendors are unsuitable for consumption and should not be reused to protect consumer health.

### A GLOBAL CONCERN

A study by Hazem Ahmed Khairy from the University of Sadat City in Egypt highlights that food safety is a global public health priority. Millions fall ill due to contaminated food, with developing countries at higher risk because of weak regulatory frameworks.

Poor food hygiene has also affected Uganda's tourism sector. Travellers often experience foodborne illnesses after consuming poorly prepared street food. Some report suffering from 'travellers' diarrhoea' or other infections within days of visiting downtown eateries.

### WAY FORWARD

Former Uganda Medical Association Dr Herbert Luswata advises that before eating at any restaurant, customers should consider the environment, the appearance and dress code of the waiters and the cleanliness of the toilets.



Houseflies can spread bacteria