

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY ON AFLATOXIN

by

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Aflatoxin contamination of food is one of the most potent food hazards that has persisted in many developing countries for decades in spite of major efforts to control the problem at the primary production level. Its impact on human health has been elaborated by many reports including World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). The health consequences of exposure to aflatoxins are diverse and critical including cancer and stunting in children. Aflatoxin exposure has been linked with consumption of cereal grains such as maize and groundnuts. Whereas maize is a major staple providing much needed energy in low income countries many of which are in Africa, groundnuts are relied on by many communities as a cheap source of protein as well as snacks. Some communities use boiled maize and groundnuts, a practice that may compound the burden of aflatoxin exposure depending on the levels of contamination.

The central role of food safety experts is to eliminate or reduce to acceptable levels hazards of aflatoxin contamination. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has identified four interventions that can easily be implemented. These include dietary diversity, improved post-harvest handling, nixtamalization, and sorting. The first intervention depends of the available choices of foods in any given set while the last three require know-how and appropriate tools for effective management of aflatoxin in food crops prone contamination. Post-harvest handling, for instance can be complicated by adverse weather patterns due to the current climatic changes experienced all over the world. Research has shown contaminations both in human food and animal feeds to levels that should worry every consumer; especially so when there appears to be many causes of aflatoxin exposure. It is, however, everyone's duty to enhance the implementation of these relevant interventions identified by IARC for the food processing sector to protect consumers. Time is ripe for aflatoxin elimination action since we have enough data.