



Hand Hygiene in the Food Industry

Effective awareness to prevent cross contamination

Many would be surprised to learn 10 million bacteria can fit on an object as small as a pinhead. Given the right conditions, those 10 million bacteria can double every 20 minutes and spread rapidly with hands responsible for the dissemination of an estimated 80 per cent of common infectious disease.

The Public Health Agency of Canada reports approximately 10 million people suffer food-related illness each year. The majority of these illnesses last a short time and cause minor symptoms, such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Controlling food-related illness is difficult because bacteria may survive food processing and foods may become contaminated during preparation, cooking or storage. While there are many instances in which food contamination can occur during processing, 40 per cent of all food-borne illness outbreaks are a direct result of hand contamination.



Often, food industry workers fail to wash their hands effectively after using the restroom, transferring microbes from employees' gastrointestinal tracts to food products. With food products being produced and processed at a higher volume than in the past,

there is a greater chance food-borne bacteria will spread to a larger number of people.

Personal hygiene, hand washing, employee illness awareness and training are key to limiting the transfer of disease from known sources of contamination. Unwashed hands are considered the most significant pathway for pathogen transfer. For this reason, food safety experts advise hand washing procedures be implemented and strictly monitored.

When done correctly, hand washing is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. Correct hand hygiene requires proper protocol – execution at frequent intervals to prevent infection – an appropriate hand washing or cleansing agent and compliance. High risk areas, for instance, where food is processed or prepared, require the strictest level of compliance.



To effectively cleanse hands:

- Place hands under water and apply soap;
- Rub hands together for at least 20 seconds;
- Wash hands thoroughly with tepid water, including wrists, palms, back of hands and under fingernails, removing all dirt;
- Rinse with water, from wrist down to fingertips, pointed downward; and
- Dry hands completely with clean, good quality, absorbent paper towel as it helps remove germs. Rather than rubbing, pat skin dry to avoid chapping and cracking.

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When soap and water are not available or hands are not visibly soiled, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer to cleanse hands. In addition to improved spreadability, foaming formulations have been shown to provide superior compliance and efficacy. When combined with hand washing, the effectiveness of alcohol hand sanitizers is increased and can reduce the risk of infection by, on average, 20 to 40 per cent.



While common sense dictates hands should be washed before handling food, there are many other occasions when hands must be washed when working in a food processing environment. This includes after touching body parts; using a restroom; coughing, sneezing or using a tissue; changing tasks, especially if switching between working with raw meat and ready to eat or cooked foods; handling money, garbage, tools or equipment; touching dirty surfaces; picking up something from the floor; and engaging in any activity that contaminates hands.

In many cases, employees showing signs of specific symptoms of communicable disease will continue to work with exposed food. In fact, 30 to 50 per cent of

all persons, even healthy ones, carry the bacteria staphylococcus aureus, which can cause a range of illnesses. Usually found on the skin or in the mouth, these bacteria are often not harmful; however, a break in the skin, burn or other injury may allow bacteria to penetrate the body's defences and cause infection.

Education and training are vital to the success of a good food safety program. In any organization, regardless of size, the instructor must ensure all employees understand the basic principles of food safety as well as their responsibility in keeping food safe. Food handling staff should receive additional instruction in personal hygiene and be required to undergo a test of their knowledge on the subject. Refresher courses should be given periodically. Also, particular attention should be drawn to the need to report illness to a supervisor as soon as it occurs. Although most people recover, food-borne illness can result in chronic health problems in two to three per cent of cases.

Health Canada estimates the annual cost related to these illnesses is between \$12 and \$14 billion. The good news is infection control practices and programs are not difficult to implement and manage and are proven to work. When it comes to food safety and reducing the risk of food-borne illness, education and awareness remains the best defence.

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