

Food Handlers Flunk Quiz on Food Safety

Basic knowledge is low among workers and managers, survey finds

Dining Insights Fall 2011

Despite emphasis in recent years on safe food handling practices, both restaurant managers and hourly employees scored low when quizzed about their knowledge of the topic in a study conducted in Chicago.

Only half of hourly food handlers scored 70% or better answering questions about basic safe food handling procedures in a survey conducted by the University of Illinois in Chicago. Managers and others who were certified in food safety scored only a little better, averaging 77%, reports Mark Dworkin, associate professor of epidemiology, and lead researcher of the study.

Researchers quizzed 372 food service personnel for the survey. The average score for all respondents was 72%.

“I really don’t know of any of these kinds of [food safety] questions that it’s okay that they don’t know,” Dworkin said, quoted in *Hygiene* magazine.

Wrong Answers

The study focused on meat and poultry handling protocols.

Asked whether beef could be defrosted safely in a microwave oven, 65% of respondents gave the wrong answer. (It can.)

More critically, 56% of respondents said it was safe to store raw meat anywhere in a refrigerator if it was wrapped in plastic. Actually, raw meat must be stored on the bottom shelf, so that blood doesn’t drip on other foods, contaminating them.

Almost 37% of respondents didn’t know that ground meat that is not completely cooked can cause bloody diarrhea.

The results of the study probably are not unique to Chicago, Dworkin says, “based on the little amount of published data out there on restaurant food handling knowledge.”

The cornerstone of safe food handling is a program developed by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, “Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, or HACCP (pronounced “hassip”). The system requires an operator to identify all the points in the food handling process, from the vendor’s warehouse to the customer’s plate, where food is at risk of contamination or spoilage.

Suppliers can be asked to provide proof that they have a HACCP program in place. At the dining center, risks include leaving food out of safe temperature zones (above 135°F or below 40°F) for too long and allowing foods to cross-contaminate through careless handling or using unclean utensils, for example.

A good food safety program based on HACCP protocols will include systems to ensure these and other risks are minimized. Most state and local health departments use HACCP as the basis for their regulations and inspections.

Soap and Water a Key

The single greatest cause of food contamination is handling with unwashed hands. Noroviruses, a leading cause of foodborne illness, are spread primarily through contaminated hands, according to Benjamin Chapman, a food safety expert at North Carolina State University, quoted in *The Los Angeles Times*.

Finding a Solution

At the dining center, the best solution is to ensure managers, chefs and at least all skilled food handlers have undergone the National Restaurant Assn.'s ServSafe® training and certification program, train their staffs and enforce safe procedures.

It's important that employees understand the reasons why safe food handling is important, as well as the procedures.

Food safety is a core element of Clarion dining service evaluations. For information, contact Tom Mac Dermott, FCSI, 603/642-8011 or Angela Phelan, 973/544-6223 or e-mail us at info@clariongp.com or visit our website, www.clariongp.com.