

Where to Start a Safe Food Program? The Basics

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Back to the basics is a frequent battle cry as chefs and other artisans try to re-capture lost skills, foods or products.

“Forward to the basics” works better for establishing a sound program for ensuring the foods served in your company or campus café and other dining outlets are safe to eat as well as healthy and tasty.

In the old days, which wasn’t so long ago, food safety was a minimal concern and there was no widely practiced system for ensuring it. For the past 10 years, food safety advocates have been trying to get food preparers and handlers to unlearn all they’ve been used to since they started working in the industry.

The most basic of the basics is working with clean hands. Cross-contamination and handling foods with soiled hands are among the most common sources of food-borne illness. You can’t see the contamination; microbes are microscopic. You’ll learn about it when you hear from diners who’ve been made ill.

Washing and Gloves

“Well,” you say, “My kitchen staff uses gloves when handling food. I don’t have anything to worry about on that score.”

Maybe. Were the cook’s hands clean when he/she put the gloves on – or was dirt transmitted from hands to gloves as they were pulled on?

Did a food handler who had been working with raw meat or poultry wash hands and put on clean gloves before starting to chop vegetables?

In your retail café, does a counter server make a sandwich and then go to the cash register to ring up the sale without changing gloves – then makes another sandwich? It happens more often than you’d like to think.

First Rule

So the first basic rule for food handlers is: Wash hands and lower arms thoroughly before starting work and putting on the plastic gloves. Remove gloves and wash hands again after completing any food handling task and don fresh gloves before handling food again.

Second Rule: Clean Facility

Right behind clean hands comes a clean kitchen, servery, equipment and facilities.

Kitchen tables, counters, cutting boards and tools must be kept clean and sanitized wherever food, raw, cooked, wrapped for storage or ready for service, may be.

You think you can tell a clean table top by running your hand over it, but because it’s smooth doesn’t mean it’s sanitized.

Is the slicing machine disassembled and cleaned every day after use? How often are the refrigerators and freezers cleaned?

Are the cooks’ knives and tools cleaned and sanitized between tasks?

A good food safety plan ensures these basic procedures are followed.

Third Rule: Safe Temps

The rule, often ignored, is simple. Foods must be kept no higher than 41°F or lower than 135°F. Foods held in between these two limits for more than two hours may no longer be safe for consumption.

Two hours isn't a magic number. Foods can be unsafe at one hour, 45 minutes or safe at two hours, 15 minutes. The safest route is to not let foods stay out of refrigeration or heat for much more than an hour.

Testing Food Safety Knowledge

You can tell how well your food service team understands safe food practices by giving them our simple, 10-question quiz.

One manager who did, reports his 10 production employees achieved an average score of 86%, but five missed two questions about safe food temperatures and three also missed the third temperature-related question. Now he knows where to focus his staff training and attention.

You can receive the test, instructions for administration and the answer sheet on request to info@clariongp.com.

The proper use of equipment in a safe food program will be discussed in the next article in this series.