

How Safe is Your Food at Work?

Most people take steps to ensure they prepare food safely in their own kitchen, but some people forget to use good hygiene practices in their work environment. Every year there are 76 million cases of food borne illness in the United States that account for 325,000 hospitalizations and over 5,000 deaths. Here are some common food safety issues you may encounter in your workplace and ideas for minimizing their impact on your health and well-being.



SITUATION: A potluck lunch (sandwiches, salads, appetizers) that has sat out on the conference table all afternoon for employees to nibble on. Should you still be nibbling on this food at 3:30 pm when it has been out since 11 am?

SOLUTION: All perishable foods should be refrigerated within 2 hours. If the temperature is 90 degrees or higher, refrigerate in 1 hour or less. Bacteria can grow and multiply rapidly at room temperature. Assign a couple people ahead of time to set-up food right before serving and clean up within an hour of serving. Serve food on smaller platters to keep more food refrigerated longer and replenish the buffet table as needed. Also, check to make sure your workplace refrigerator temperature is under 40 degrees F.

SITUATION: You bring a brown bag lunch and place it in the employee refrigerator. You end up going out to lunch with a client and you forget about your bag lunch. When you find your lunch in the fridge a week later, you wonder if you can still eat it.

SOLUTION: Lunches left uneaten in your employee fridge for more than a couple of days are unsafe to eat and they can contaminate other foods in the refrigerator. Keep a marking pen next to the fridge so employees can write their name and date on their bag. Set up and post a weekly cleaning schedule so everyone is aware lunches or other single food items left in the fridge for a couple days past their date will be tossed.

SITUATION: You wipe off a break room table with a sponge or dishcloth that has been used repeatedly to clean everything from the break room table to the counter and sink.

SOLUTION: Sponges or dishcloths should be tossed out as these items spread germs and bacteria everywhere. Consider using paper towels or disposable kitchen wipes for use in the office kitchen or break areas.

SITUATION: A large bowl of popcorn has been left out on the conference table for everyone to munch on. Is this a healthy way to enjoy a snack?

SOLUTION: Do you know if your coworkers wash their hands well? Are you aware that over 50% of food borne illness is due to improper hand washing? Before you set out treats, consider sanitary ways to serve them like using a serving spoon and paper bowls or packaging individual servings in small sandwich bags for a take-and-eat snack.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), hand washing is considered the single most important method of preventing the spread of germs. If you need a helpful reminder, consider posting a sign in your employee bathroom and break room areas reminding employees to wash their hands. You can contact your local health department or download free hand washing signs and resources from one of the CDC websites listed below:

- CDC: Clean Hands Campaign – www.cdc.gov/cleanhands/
- Fight Bac! – Handwashing – Clean Fact Sheet – www.fightbac.org/images/pdfs/clean.pdf
- CDC: Hand Hygiene Saves Lives – www.cdc.gov/handhygiene/

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