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Operations

Putting Clean Hands to the Food-Safety Task

by Katie Pater, Associate Editor

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A little hand-washing training goes a long way when it comes to handling food.

A little soap and a splash of water may seem good enough to keep hands clean, but in food-service, washing up requires much more attention.

“[Hand washing] is a very critical area of food safety,” says Jorge Hernandez, senior director of science and regulatory relations at the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation in Chicago.

A single foodborne outbreak can potentially close down an operation. “Businesses are in the hands of employees,” says Hernandez. “A lot of outbreaks are being transferred from food handlers.”

Even people who have been taught the importance of hand washing as children do not necessarily do it properly. “They don’t use soap or they barely wet the tips of their fingers,” says Hernandez. Therefore, employee hand-washing training is essential.

HANDS-ON-TRAINING

By means of a video or personal instructions, employees should be educated on the proper techniques for keeping clean. The first rule is that more than hands must be washed. Exposed portions of arms as well as hands should be scrubbed with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds.

Special attention should be paid to areas under fingernails. Employees should finish by rinsing off soap and drying hands with disposable paper towels or an automatic hand dryer.

Scrubbing for at least 20 seconds may seem like a long time, but hygiene experts say a lesser encounter with soap is insufficient. Employees can keep track of those seconds with a watch. “Some people use tricks like singing ‘Happy Birthday’ twice,” says Hernandez.

After the initial training, managers need to monitor employees’ actual hand-washing practices. “A couple months after training, ask employees to show how they wash,” says Hernandez. “If they are not doing it right, retrain them.”

Knowing when to wash hands is as important as knowing how. Hand

washing is an absolute must after coughing or sneezing, eating or drinking, using the bathroom, and handling garbage. “Also when going from raw to ready foods,” says Hernandez.

After washing, employees can take advantage of other cleanliness techniques. Gel hand sanitizers are helpful after washing, but should not be used in lieu of a proper scrub.

Wearing gloves during food preparation also keeps bacteria and contaminants from spreading, but even that doesn’t eliminate the need for clean hands. **R&I**

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