

Food Safety for Restaurants: How to Prevent Foodborne Illness, Food Contamination & Lawsuits

Foodborne illness causes an estimated 47.8 million sicknesses and about 3,000 deaths in the U.S. annually. In 2011, an outbreak of a foodborne illness from Listeria-contaminated cantaloupe took at least 13 lives, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Restaurants and their employees are responsible for the safety of their dishes and the health and safety of their customers.

If someone gets sick from eating food prepared in your restaurant, you could:

- Be sued
- Be found liable in a lawsuit
- Be responsible for the medical costs
- Be responsible for monetary settlements, which have amounted to **millions of dollars** in several wrongful death cases
- Destroy the reputation of your business
- Lose your business
- Have to file bankruptcy

Common causes of foodborne illness

Reasons people become infected is because of bacteria growth, improper food storage, improper food prep hygiene, cross contamination, undercooked meat, and infected prep workers transmitting illness to the consumer.

The CDC estimates that 9.4 million of annual illnesses are caused by 31 known foodborne pathogens, and that 90% of all illnesses due to known pathogens are caused by seven pathogens: Salmonella, norovirus, Campylobacter, Toxoplasma, E. coli O157:H7, Listeria and Clostridium perfringens.

How to prevent food contamination and foodborne illnesses in your restaurant

It all starts with your supplier

Once food has been contaminated, there is no way to change that. If you purchase produce from a farm and it has e. coli bacteria, you will transmit that to your customers. You could be found liable for serving the tainted food.

Do your homework when choosing your suppliers. Choose reputable distributors and make sure you are receiving good quality, fresh food items. Ask questions about the safety mechanisms they have in place to prevent contamination.

Develop a system to quickly identify all inventory from a particular supplier, so if one supplier has a recall, you can quickly deal with it and keep business moving at the same time.

Keep cold foods cold until ready to use

You must keep frozen food frozen and cold food below 41 degrees through the transportation and storage process. If food that needs refrigeration is left above 41 degrees for more than four hours, there is a high risk of foodborne illness caused by bacterial growth.

Make sure your suppliers follow the cold chain and once the items are in your facility, use strict measures to ensure they are refrigerated immediately and all fridges and freezers are operating at the proper temperatures. The less time foods are at temperatures above 41 degrees, the less opportunity for bacteria to grow.

Foods must be cooked to proper temperatures

Always use a meat thermometer to make sure that food has been cooked to a safe temperature. Food that does not reach a safe temperature can allow bacteria to breed and cause illness.

Put the thermometer into the thickest part of the cut to make sure it has cooked all the way through. Do not allow it to touch the bone as this will give an incorrect temperature. The temperatures on this chart must be maintained for at least 15 seconds to kill harmful bacteria.

As a general guide:

Roast & steak: 145° F

Fish: 145° F

Poultry: 165° F

Ground meats: 155° F

Leftovers: 165° F

Eggs: Undercooked eggs can transmit salmonella. Yolk and whites should be solid, not runny.

About microwave cooking

Microwaves tend to cook food unevenly. Stir food while it is cooking and leave it covered for two minutes after it is done. This will ensure the even distribution of heat to destroy bacteria in colder spots.

Cross-contamination is the leading cause of foodborne illness

Cross contamination occurs when bacteria is transferred from one food item to another via work surface, improper storage, thawing, preparation, or the cooking process.

- Use separate knives for poultry, meats, and produce.
- Use separate cutting boards for meats, poultry, and produce.
- Never put cooked food onto a plate or tray that has been used for raw foods.
- Use high heat for sterilization when washing dishes that have come in contact with raw foods.
- Wash all foods well before preparing.
- Wash hands with anti-bacterial soap frequently during the cooking process. Do not handle cooked food after handling raw food without washing hands first or changing gloves.
- Do not use the same utensils for cooked and raw foods.

Employee food safety training is the law in California

All your employees need to get their **California Food Handler Cards**. Not only is it the law in California as of January 1, 2012, it is an essential overview of food safety and a good learning opportunity for employees new to the industry or younger workers.

Once employees are trained and have their cards, there is no excuse for them not working in the safest, cleanest manner possible. Make sure your employees know that food safety is a priority in your restaurant and quality standards must be maintained at all times.



How to protect yourself when all else fails

Even the most careful food suppliers, chefs, and restaurants can still have instances of food contamination and resulting illness. You can do everything in your power to run a clean, safe kitchen, but there is always the chance that something outside of your control can happen.

Work with an expert to get a good restaurant insurance policy that is tailored to your facility. It is important to work with someone who knows the industry well and understands how your restaurant is unique. A restaurant insurance specialist can help identify the risks and advise the best protection for your situation.

Restaurant insurance coverages that can help protect you:

Food contamination coverage: Covers you financially in the event of food poisoning or communicable diseases transmitted by an employee.

Food product liability coverage: If you are producing goods for sale, this can protect you in the event that your food product causes harm to the user.

Food spoilage coverage: If your refrigeration breaks down or your power goes out, the spoil food can be replaced if you have this coverage.

Food product recall coverage: If the food products you sell are recalled, your expenses that result will be covered, such as the cost to notify consumers, shipping and disposal of the product, refunding the customer, and more.

**If you have questions or need assistance,
restaurant insurance experts are here to help.**

Call (800) 331-4700

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