

Managing Hospitality Risk Foodborne Illness



Foodborne Illness - What's at risk?

Accurate diagnosis is sometimes difficult, but it has been estimated that somewhere between 24 to 81 million foodborne illnesses occur each year, resulting in more than 10,000 foodborne-associated deaths with the consequential costs ranging anywhere from \$7.7 to \$23 billion.

If one of your guests falls ill after eating food prepared in your establishment, they may have been exposed to biological hazards, including bacteria, viruses, chemical hazards such as cleaning agents and toxins, or physical hazards such as bone, glass, and/or metal. Symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, and/or severe headaches. Those with the least ability to fend off infections (infants, elderly, pregnant women, and the immuno-compromised) are most vulnerable.



The consequences can be devastating, including serious injury, and even death. In busy restaurants or banquet settings, large groups can be affected during a single serving, leading to multiple claims or even class-action suits. Health departments can issue fines and suspend food service privileges. A hotel's reputation can be irreparably harmed.

What are your legal obligations as a hospitality manager?

Hospitality managers have a legal obligation to sell only food that is wholesome, fit for consumption, and prepared in a safe manner. This responsibility is mandated by the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), as well as, other state and local laws and health codes. Whether you are aware of it or not, there is an "implied warranty" on all food that you serve. You are required to operate your facility in a manner that protects guests from the possibility of foodborne illness, or any other injury that may be caused by consuming unwholesome food or beverages. To enforce these standards, local health departments will provide routine inspections of restaurants and other food production facilities. Working cooperatively and proactively with your health department representative is sound practice. Besides inspection services, most health departments have outstanding resources available to help you train your staff and remind them of their obligations.

How can you better protect your organization?

For some suggestions designed to assist you in developing sound policies and procedures for your organization, please review the attached checklist.

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Checklist: Foodborne Illness

- A minimum (more if local ordinance requires) of one person per shift should be certified in food safety and sanitation. Ideally, all employees should go through the course and achieve their certification within 30 days of coming to work.
- Job descriptions for all food and beverage employees should state clearly the expectation that everyone practice good personal hygiene and grooming, and supervisors should consistently enforce this rule.
- Signs that are legible to all employees should be posted throughout the “back of the house” reminding employees that prior to beginning work, after using the restroom or smoking a cigarette, they must wash their hands thoroughly with hot water and use the sanitizer that is provided.
- During each shift, one employee should be responsible for cleaning and sanitizing the fixtures and door handles throughout the facility, including automated faucets and flushing mechanisms.
- A program of pest control should be implemented and documented and professional services engaged.
- All kitchen personnel should wear hats or hairnets.
- A variety of code-colored cutting boards, each color being designated for a different activity should be used to avoid cross contamination.
- Different colored mops should be used to insure that mops being used to clean the bathrooms are not used to clean the kitchen or the dining rooms, and vice-versa.
- Temperature gauges should be installed on all cooling and heating equipment and should be inspected regularly for defaults and shortcomings.
- Kitchen supervisors should have biotherms (hand temperature gauges) to ensure that foods are kept out of the temperature danger zone of 40 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Temperature charts, logging the routine inspections of the temperatures, should be used for all heating and cooling equipment, including the dishwasher machines.
- All food and beverage employees should be trained and tested about proper thawing and cooling, proper cooking techniques, proper reheating, and proper hot-holding.
- Proper food rotation for inventory and leftovers should be ensured by a date-labeling system affixed to all food products being stored.
- Servers should be taught to never touch a guest’s glass by or near the rim. They should be taught to carry and deliver the glass by the base or near the base.
- To retrieve ice from the ice machines, servers should use an ice scoop - routinely cleaned - and never their hands or a glass container. The same is true for bartenders preparing drinks.
- A warning, pertaining to certain possible allergic reactions and other elements, should be added to the menu informing customers of the dangers of certain foods or ingredients (see NSU’s “Truth in Menu” bulletin).
- A food safety list should be developed and posted conspicuously throughout the kitchen areas reminding employees about food safety issues.