LouisianA Public Schools
LARMA
Risk Management Agency

Risk Control Bulletin

Cafeteria Food Safety

"It was a story that opened some eyes and turned some stomachs." That is how NBC described a recent *Dateline* investigation into the food being served to students in America's school cafeterias. Last spring, the primetime news magazine took their cameras into some of the nation's largest school systems to check the safety of lunchroom meals. What they found in some schools was a number of critical safety violations. A follow-up story was broadcast this fall to see what, if any improvements these school systems had made in the area of food safety.

This story and others help remind us of the importance of food safety in school lunchrooms. When school cafeteria staffs do not take their responsibility seriously enough, students and staff can get sick.

Foodbourne illness results from eating food that is contaminated with harmful virus or bacteria, such as Hepatitis A or Salmonella. The unpleasant effects of foodbourne illness may require absences from school while the illness runs its course. However, there may be more severe consequences. Diarrhea and the resulting dehydration may require hospitalization and can lead to temporary or permanent arthritic conditions and death in some people.

There are four critical areas that have an effect on food safety and should be constantly monitored.

Cooking and Holding Temperatures – Potentially hazardous foods support the rapid growth of disease-causing bacteria. These foods consist in whole or in part of milk and milk products, meat, fish, eggs, poultry and shellfish. They can also include cooked rice, beans, pasta, gravies, soups, potatoes, chili and tofu.

Cook all foods to their recommended temperatures. When storing or holding foods, keep cold foods cold (below 41º F) and hot foods hot (above 140º F). This is critical even when food is prepared off premises and transported to the school location.

Do not rely solely on built-in thermometers in coolers, freezers and ovens. Internal temperatures should be checked regularly with insert thermometers. Do not allow these foods to be held, even for a short period at room temperature. Bacteria grow quickly and multiply exponentially at temperatures between 41 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

Cross Contamination occurs when bacteria is spread between food surfaces or equipment. It is most likely to happen when raw food touches or drips onto other food, surfaces or equipment or workers touch raw food with their hands. Steps to help prevent cross contamination include keeping raw and ready-to-eat foods well separated, cleaning surfaces after they have been used for raw food and thorough and frequent hand washing.

Many experts recommend using separate utensils and surfaces for meat and poultry and the use of disposable gloves when preparing these foods.

Overall Sanitation – The control of insects, rodents and other vermin is an on-going battle, even in the cleanest food preparation and storage areas. Cafeteria staff should be alert for signs of infestation and take immediate steps to remedy the situation.

Disease carrying insects are attracted to areas which are not properly cleaned. Make sure garbage is removed and supplies are put away. Thorough sweeping, mopping and cleaning will reduce the chances of infestation. Mice can enter a building through even the smallest opening in the outside wall. Check storage areas daily for signs of rodent droppings or of chewing into dry storage items.

Cafeteria workers should also be aware of how food items are stored. Food items should be completely isolated from non-food items especially cleaning chemicals and other chemicals typically used in food preparation areas. This will help reduce the possibility of chemical contamination and poisoning.

Employee Hygiene – It is estimated that twenty-five percent of foodbourne illness is the result of improper employee practices including personal hygiene. All employees must regularly and thoroughly wash their hands. They should wear clean uniforms. Aprons should not be used as hand towels and should be removed when leaving food preparation areas. Jewelry should not be worn during food preparation.

Employees should not handle food if they are experiencing diarrhea, cold or flu-like symptoms. Cuts, abrasions, burns and open sores should be properly bandaged and covered with a water proof protector such as disposable gloves. School cafeteria staff receive regular training in food safety in most school districts. However, it is easy to over-look or ignore this training when in a hurry or distracted.

Local health departments perform regular health inspections of school cafeterias in most jurisdictions. Although this can be a valuable resource, each school should take responsibility in monitoring and controlling exposures from food preparation and service.