Personal Hygiene – Basic Rules

Food handlers have a moral and legal responsibility to maintain high standards of personal cleanliness to ensure they do not contaminate food.

You may be handling food that must be kept safe from contamination, or you may want to look after your own health and well-being in the workplace. In both situations, some common good hygiene practices will ensure your own health is maintained and provide a margin of safety.

Hands
The hands are often in direct contact with food, making them one of the main routes for contaminating food and transferring food poisoning bacteria (pathogens). Food handlers must wash their hands regularly throughout the day to ensure they avoid food contamination and to avoid picking up any pathogens that could make them sick.

Hands should be washed right up to the elbow using running hot water and dispenser soap. To ensure effective cleaning, rub soapy hands into a lather for at least 20 seconds before rinsing. When finished, use a clean, dry paper towel to turn off the tap. Dry hands and nails with an air dryer, single service roller towel or paper towel to avoid re-contaminating them.

Keep nails short to prevent dirt and other contaminants from gathering under the fingernails. Clean fingernails with a nail brush soaked in sanitiser. If handling food, avoid artificial nails or nail polish, which can become food contaminants if they fall off or peel.

Always wash hands after using the toilet, blowing your nose, coughing, sneezing, smoking, eating, combing or touching your hair, handling waste food or rubbish, or handling cleaning equipment. Wash hands after handling any raw foods, especially meat and chicken, before handling other foods. This will prevent cross-contamination. Also wash hands BEFORE eating or smoking, to avoid transferring pathogens. This is important for food handlers, as well as anyone working with hazardous substances that could have adverse health effects, to make sure toxins are not inadvertently ingested.

Where use of gloves is not practical, clean hands can be readily disinfected using alcohol-based hand sanitisers. Position dispensers near hand washing stations and entrances to food-processing areas. Apply sanitiser to clean hands, ensuring thorough coverage, then simply allow the product to evaporate. Sanitiser should be re-applied after washing hands or when re-entering the food processing area.

Nose, Mouth and Ears
Approximately 40% of all adults carry staphylococci bacteria in their nose or mouth, and coughing or sneezing can spread these bacteria for a surprisingly large distance as fine droplets. To prevent the spread of human pathogens, avoid coughing or sneezing over or around food, or picking or scratching the nose or any other part of the body. If you have to sneeze or cough, move away from food and food preparation surfaces. Use a tissue to cover nose and mouth and to wipe any discharges, then dispose of the used tissue in a proper waste container and wash hands before returning to work tasks.
Discharges from ears, eyes and nose may contaminate food. Food workers should check with their doctor is suffering any one of these conditions.

Never taste food with your fingers or use an unwashed utensil. Don’t blow into glasses to polish them or into bags to open them – that just spreads the germs.

**Cuts and Sores**
If you have any cuts, scrapes, sores, etc, these wounds must be completely covered by waterproof dressings and suitable gloves. It’s a good idea to use coloured dressings that can be easily located if they fall off – some industrial plasters also incorporate a metal strip to enable detection if they fall into manufactured product. This can avoid an expensive claim from arising from a customer finding the lost dressing in their product.

Waterproof dressings can also protect cuts from contamination or irritation and prevent them from going septic.

**Hair**
Keep hair clean and brush it regularly. This should be done before putting on uniforms and away from food preparation and handling areas - hair falls out constantly and poses a common food contamination risk. Food preparation workers should wear a suitable head covering, and long hair should be adequately tied back out of the way in food service areas.

**Uniforms and Protective Clothing**
Most food handlers are required to wear uniforms or some kind of protective clothing to avoid food contamination. Normal clothing accumulates dust, pet hairs, human hairs, woollen fibres and other contaminants that consumers don’t want in their food.

Food handlers should wear clean, washable, light-coloured protective clothing. In most cases, this is provided by the employer. Uniforms should completely cover – or replace – personal clothing. Remember, the purpose of uniforms and protective clothing is to protect the food from contamination, not protection of personal clothing. Always change uniforms as they become dirty, and avoid wiping hands on aprons or clothing.

In many cases, it may also be appropriate to use disposable gloves when handling food. Follow the same principles as for hand hygiene, and replace gloves if they become contaminated.

**Jewellery**
Jewellery items such as watches, earrings, jewelled rings or brooches, necklaces, etc pose another food contamination hazard. Dirt and bacteria can build up underneath jewellery and inadvertently transferred to food. In addition, damage to jewellery can result in gemstones, small pieces of metal or bits of glass falling into the food, resulting in a customer complaint.

In some working circumstances, jewellery can also pose a safety risk for workers. If jewellery is caught in machinery, the worker can be seriously injured. Even a simple
ring can be caught in moving machine parts, resulting in crushed or amputated fingers. If you work with machinery and don’t want to remove a plain wedding band, it may be preferable to wear disposable gloves to reduce the risk of catching the ring on the machine.

**Perfume**
Perfumes should not be used when handling food. Any strongly scented substance can taint foods, especially those with a high fat content or strong adsorbent qualities. While this taint may not pose a health hazard, it can result in customer complaints, so it is best to avoid strong fragrances when handling foods.

**Smoking**
Tobacco products (including cigarettes, pipes or cigars) must not be used in areas where food is prepared, handled or stored. Not only is there a risk of food contamination from cigarette butts and ashes, but also smoking involves touching the lips, which could result in bacteria being transferred to food. Smoking also increases the risk of food handlers coughing on food, and saliva deposited on cigarette butts can carry human pathogens. It also creates an unpleasant and unhealthy environment for non-smokers.

**Worker Health**
To prevent spreading illness, workers should only be handling food if they are in good health. Any food worker suffering from respiratory infections, vomiting, diarrhoea or any food-borne infection must not be allowed to work with food until clear of the illness for at least 2 days (or cleared by qualified medical personnel). If symptoms return, they must be excluded from work until clear again.

Any food worker with skin infections, sores, heavy cold, eye or ear discharge, runny nose, etc must stay away from work until symptoms have gone.

**Rubbish Disposal**
Discarded foods can rot quickly, creating a source of disease. Insects and rodents are attracted to rotting food and bring harmful bacteria that thrive in the rotting rubbish. The smell of rotting food can also become unpleasant. To minimise risk, keep rubbish containers in good condition, and always clean bins after emptying. A tight-fitting lid and use of plastic bin liners will keep unwanted pests out, as well as helping to contain unpleasant odours.

Make sure rubbish bins are emptied regularly. Where bins are emptied into waste disposal skips or other outdoor-storage containers, make sure the area is adequately paved, graded and drained to make it easier to keep the area clean and pest-free. Rubbish skips should be fitted with covers and kept closed when not transferring rubbish.

**Food Safety and HACCP**
Personal hygiene is an important component of food safety programmes, and it often plays a major role in HACCP programmes. HACCP stands for Hazard Analysis and
Critical Control Point – a systematic approach to identifying and managing food safety hazards.

For more information about hygiene, food safety and HACCP, refer to the following websites:

NZ Food Safety Authority (NZFSA): www.nzfsa.govt.nz/
