

Winning the Battle for Food Safety in Restaurants

A proactive approach can prevent outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

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Dr. Hudson Garret recently conducted a webinar with restaurant operators focusing on food safety. At one point, Garrett asked how many operators believed illnesses were connected to their establishments.

A whopping 80 percent of the roughly 100 people involved admitted that customers had probably gotten sick while dining in their restaurant, with 30 percent saying it happens once or twice a month. Another 10 percent reported occurrences once or twice a week.

Garrett, senior director of clinical affairs for Orangeburg, N.Y.-based Sani Professional, a company dedicated to promoting restaurant cleanliness and preventing illness within the food industry, expressed surprise, saying it speaks to the impact of foodborne illnesses in the United States and the opportunities for improvement.

“We have a long path ahead of us,” said Garrett. “We must realize that food safety is everyone’s responsibility, including the consumers. Engaging in this fight against foodborne illness united will yield tremendous success.”

Experts believe it is possible to reduce the number of illnesses stemming from restaurants to zero. They further contend their

opinion isn’t unrealistic. Reaching that point, however, will require changes within the industry, both in terms of how operators view and approach the likelihood of outbreaks within their eateries.

This white paper, sponsored by Sani Professional, discusses how a proactive approach to maintaining a clean and sanitary environment can break the chain of illness.

Persistence of illnesses

Foodborne illnesses are among the biggest problems facing the fast casual and quick-service industries, with one in six Americans each year becoming sick from dining out. In fact, more than 1,000 outbreaks occur each year in restaurants, with familiar culprits — salmonella, Norovirus and other potent germs. Those illnesses can land patrons in doctor’s offices and hospitals. Or worse, cause death or permanent disability — not to mention the public relations nightmare associated with foodborne illness outbreaks.

Almost any type of food can spread illnesses, particularly meat, greens and dairy. Outbreaks tend to be traced to improper storage and unclean surfaces that allow bacteria to latch onto food products.

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Though germs are most commonly transmitted through the hands – spurring the need for using gloves throughout the production process – bacteria can fester in a number of places within the restaurant, such as equipment with food particles that get stuck and go undetected deep inside crevices.

Cost of combating illnesses

The cost of treating people with illnesses linked to restaurants annually tops \$365 million in direct medical costs, Garrett said. Unfortunately, that cost has not declined in recent years.

For an industry where profit margins are extremely tight, there isn't much funding to take on or expand safety initiatives. Combating potential illnesses, however, doesn't require extensive costs, Garrett said. In fact, there are a number of measures restaurants can take that involve little or no expense.

Start with the education of staff members, which Garrett considers the most important piece of a prevention strategy. Training workers should detail precisely how to clean work stations, prep meals and how to properly handle and store products to prevent them from becoming contaminated.



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Workers must be aware of the resistance of some germs, Garrett said. Some, such as the highly contagious Norovirus, can survive temperatures as high as 140 degrees (e.g., the quick stemming processes that are used for cooking shellfish). And, of course, food that might be contaminated should be thrown out, Garrett said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also offers an array of free, easy-to-read posters and brochures that spotlight common food industry viruses and prevention methods. Those can be hung at key locations in the restaurant as constant reminders to workers.

Persistent hand washing is considered one of the best prevention techniques. But it's not only the restaurant's employees who ought to do so. Customers should, too, since they can pass viruses just as easily.

Restaurants can place free-standing hand sanitizer stations at entrances and point-of-sale positions as well as consider placing individual packets of hand wipes on tables to promote use prior to eating. Depending on the restaurant's traffic, a business can expect to spend anywhere from a couple hundred dollars a month to a few thousand.

Executing a winnable approach

Food safety historically has been a reactive field, Garrett said. More time is focused on the treatment of those who become ill and clean-ups that come after an outbreak. A proactive approach must be in place early on to mitigate conditions that can be ripe for germs to flourish.

Within that strategy, restaurant operators and managers need to look at their operations holistically to determine the best ways to prevent issues. For instance, a business

might weigh whether it is best to use disposable or reusable silverware and whether one poses more risk of spreading germs over another versus the cost of constantly washing items or tossing them.

Managers are considered the most pivotal people in the effort to prevent illnesses. More than anyone, they possess the ability to control things that have profound effects on keeping the business problem-free. This includes ensuring specific food prep and cooking protocols are followed, educating workers on potential dangers and best practices and making sanitation opportunities available to customers at every point throughout their dining experience.

As it relates to workers, the spread of disease often – but not always – begins with them. Employees who might exhibit symptoms of illness should remain away from the restaurant. Allowing workers flexibility when they are sick protects other workers and, ultimately, patrons who might come in contact with the ill staff member, Garrett said.

Managers can still ensure the truthfulness of an ailing worker by requiring them to provide a doctor's note or documentation that they sought medical treatment.

“If you're following basic principles, you will mitigate risk,” Garrett said. “If you're doing those things as part of your everyday system, you're never going to be faced with an outbreak.”



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About the sponsor: Sani Professional is considered a leader in the pre-moistened sanitation wipe industry. A subsidiary of Nice Pak/Professional Disposables Inc., the company offers an array of disposable hand wipes, hard surface wipes and cleaning accessories that make commercial cleaning convenient, safe, cost efficient and environmentally friendly. It is a fast growing solutions provider for the cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting needs of food, industrial, healthcare, hospitality and other broader away-from-home operations. Committed to the prevention of community-acquired infections, Sani Professional offers products that are EPA-registered and food code compliant to meet food safety industry standards. For more information, visit wipeyourworldclean.com.