



Hand Contact With Food A Major Cause of Foodborne Illness

Foodborne Illness in BC

Each year, there are an estimated four hundred and seventy seven thousand cases of foodborne illnesses in British Columbia. This translates to an average of one infection per person every seven and a half years. The total cost of foodborne illness in British Columbia is estimated to be 408 million dollars.

How Much is Caused by Hands?

As many as 40% of outbreaks associated with food service establishments are the result of poor handwashing and cross-contamination. In studies where outbreak data has been reviewed infected workers were responsible for 17.6 percent of outbreaks in which contributing factors were reported between 1980 and 1993. Infected workers were responsible for 154 outbreaks, 8800 cases of illness, 221 hospitalizations and 3 fatalities.

But Infected Workers Shouldn't Work!

True! Yet there is evidence to suggest four out of five food workers will work despite having a gastrointestinal illness. In fact, it is suggested that working individuals probably eat one meal each week in an establishment where people with diarrheal disease were working.

What if They Wash Their Hands?

Handwashing is thought to be the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection through food. However, a study from the New England Journal

of Medicine shows that healthcare workers fail to meet established procedural handwashing requirements over 60% of the time. Another study published in *Infectious Diseases in Children* reports that 33% of daycare facilities had poor handwashing techniques and no policy for handwashing before eating. Are food handlers any more diligent ?

Are Gloves the Answer?

Clean gloves reduce the risk associated with handling ready-to-eat foods with bare hands. Therefore, gloves may be an answer to preventing the spread of infectious organisms to ready-to-eat foods. But only if they are kept clean and in good repair.

Are There Other Alternatives?

Yes! This is not a glove rule. A public health goal is to prevent the spread of infections because of hand contact with ready-to-eat foods. As such, tongs, napkins, spoons, spatulas or other suitable devices would also be acceptable. Remember the goal - no bare hand contact with ready-to-eat food.

Is Handwashing then Necessary?

Definitely! Effective handwashing remains the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection. All workers, whether infected or not, must still wash their hands after visiting the washroom, handling raw foods, smoking, or performing any other act that might contaminate the hand. This prevents the spread of infectious organisms from hands to surfaces that might contact ready-to-eat food.

