

# Hand Contact with Food

## A Major Cause of Foodborne Illness



### Foodborne Illness in British Columbia

Each year, there are an estimated five hundred and fifty thousand (550,000) cases of foodborne illnesses in British Columbia (BC). The total cost of foodborne illness in BC is estimated in the hundreds of millions of dollars. One in every eight individuals in BC gets food poisoning every year, equivalent to 13% of the BC population!<sup>1</sup>

In a review of 816 foodborne outbreaks, the most frequent reported factor as the cause of the outbreak was when an infected food handler had bare hand contact with the food, and then failed to wash their hands.<sup>2</sup>

### But Infected Workers Shouldn't Work!

**True!** Yet there is evidence to suggest one out of five food workers will work despite having a gastrointestinal illness.<sup>3</sup> The CDC estimates that 70% of norovirus outbreaks are caused by infected food workers.<sup>3</sup>



### What if They Wash Their Hands?

Handwashing is thought to be the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection through food. Compliance with handwashing in restaurants has been reported as low as 5%.<sup>4</sup> Failure to wash hands is not limited to food handlers. In hospitals, average rates of handwashing are reported to be below 50%.<sup>5</sup>

### Are Gloves the Answer?

We recommend using clean gloves to reduce the risk associated with handling ready-to-eat foods with bare hands. Gloves can prevent 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*

### Handwashing Tips<sup>6</sup>

Effective handwashing remains the single most important means of preventing the spread of infection. All workers must wash their hands after visiting the washroom, handling raw foods, smoking, or performing any other act that might contaminate the hand.

The following steps are recommended for effective handwashing:

#### What Kind of Soap to Use

- ✓ Use plain soap that does not contain antibacterial agents. Plain soap will remove the dirt and grease that attract bad bacteria.
- ✓ Plain soap will not kill the good bacteria that live on the hands.
- ✓ Using antibacterial products unnecessarily increases the concentration of antibiotics in the water supply and in the environment.

#### Steps When Using Soap

- ✓ Remove any hand or arm jewellery you may be wearing.
- ✓ Wet your hands with warm water.
- ✓ Apply plain soap to your hands and rub together for 20 seconds (the length of time it takes to sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star or Happy Birthday).
- ✓ Wash the front and back of your hands, as well as between your fingers and under your nails.
- ✓ Rinse your hands well for 10 seconds under warm running water, using a rubbing motion.
- ✓ Wipe and dry your hands gently with a paper towel or a clean towel. Drying them vigorously can damage the skin.
- ✓ Turn off the tap using the paper towel so that you do not re-contaminate your hands. When using a public bathroom, use the same paper towel to open the door when you leave.
- ✓ If skin dryness is a problem, use a moisturizing lotion.

#### References

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5. Pittet, D. (2001) J. Hosp. Infect. 48 Suppl A:S40-46
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*Updated: Nov 2014*



**BC Centre for Disease Control**  
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