

WSGW RADIO PRESENTATION

FOOD SAFETY KNOWLEDGE AND EXPECTATIONS OF INSPECTIONS

July 10, 2018

Most foodborne illnesses can be prevented, but foodborne illnesses continue to be a significant problem in the U.S. Preventing the spread of foodborne illnesses is the primary function of the public health system's role in regulating food service establishments.

Each year in the U.S. there are approximately 9.4 million illnesses associated with consuming food contaminated with bacteria and viruses, with 55,961 of these illnesses resulting in hospitalizations, and 1,351 resulting in deaths.

Approximately one half of the foodborne disease outbreaks reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) resulted from consuming food from a restaurant or deli. (*Think about where the other 50% of outbreaks come from.*)

The next generation of food handlers is in need of food safety education.

Research suggests that older teenagers and college students are at a greater risk of foodborne illness because of their food handling practices. One study found that less than 50 percent of the recommended practices were followed by students. The practices include basic hand hygiene, simple steps to prevent cross-contamination, and use of food thermometers.

The public, in general, has an unrealistic expectation of regulations and enforcement by public health authorities. A study of college students in North Carolina found that students believed that violations of "good retail practices" such as evidence of pests and poor general sanitation warranted immediate closure of a facility. In contrast, most students felt that inadequate hot holding temperatures at a buffet should result in a follow-up inspection or correction by the next routine inspection. This suggests that students lack an appreciation of factors that have a direct link in causing foodborne illnesses.

Research revealed that students more frequently supported immediate closure for poor general sanitation issues, evidence of pests, and inadequate hand washing. This suggests students have an excessive expectation of a single food service inspection given the limited amount of time health officials spend conducting inspections. The priority for health officials is to ensure violations are corrected, preferably during the inspection or in the allowed time period for correction. Immediate closure is not a viable course of action for a single occurrence of any particular violation, but rather is a response to multiple and chronic rule violations.

Inspections provide only a brief snapshot of regulatory compliance. Maintaining food safety is the ultimate responsibility of food service operators and managers, while health officials provide consultation and education to employees and owners at food service facilities.

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Sources: Journal of Environmental Health, July/August 2018
Food Safety News, July 9, 2018