

Illness Reporting, Restriction, and Exclusion

FOOD PROTECTION CONNECTION



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Employees are our greatest asset, but also our greatest risk. Nothing could be truer than when we're talking about employee illnesses in foodservice operations and the policies and procedures put in place for reporting, restricting, and excluding sick foodservice workers. As a foodservice manager, a sick employee can be your worst nightmare, with the potential to harm, sicken, and even kill guests who dine at our facilities.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identifies the top five risk factors responsible for most foodborne illness outbreaks as:

1. Dirty and/or contaminated utensils and equipment
2. Improper holding temperatures of potentially hazardous foods
3. Improper cooking temperatures of food
4. *Poor employee health and hygiene*
5. Food from unsafe sources

This article focuses on #4 and will review employee illness and reporting policies surrounding employee health within the foodservice industry. In this article, we will assume that the population being served is highly susceptible; therefore, when discussing restrictions and exclusions, we will always err on the side of caution. Proper management means ensuring that food employees do not work when they are ill, and also having procedures in place to identify employees who may spread foodborne pathogens to food, other employees, and guests consuming the items being served.

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Katie Clay Sabatini, RD, LDN is the Food Safety and Quality Assurance Manager for Hershey Entertainment and Resorts, where she puts into practice her passion for food safety. Sabatini has comprehensive knowledge of industry food safety application, implementation, and management. She received her BS in nutrition & dietetics from the University of Delaware, and is actively completing her MS in food safety at Michigan State University.

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) identifies the top six pathogens that are highly infective and easily transmitted by sick food handlers. These pathogens are called the “Big 6” and include: Norovirus, Hepatitis A, Typhoid fever caused by Salmonella Typhi, Nontyphoidal Salmonella (NTS), Shigella spp., and Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli (STEC)—also referred to as E. coli. As managers, we must educate our food handlers on the importance of awareness of the “Big 6” to prevent the spread of illness in our operations. We must also make sure that every food handler understands their personal responsibility to report symptoms, diagnosis, previous illness, and exposure to any of these pathogens.

In chapter 2, part 2-2 of the 2017 FDA Food Code, Employee Health is outlined in subsections covering: Responsibilities and Reporting Symptoms and Diagnosis; Conditions of Exclusion & Restriction; and Managing Exclusions and Restrictions. Many people find the Food Code daunting to interpret, so a simplified overview is presented here.

All foodservice establishments should have a *Conditional Employee Reporting Agreement*. This agreement serves to inform conditional food employees (those people offered a job, but prior to starting employment) of their responsibility to notify the Person In Charge (PIC) when they experience any of the listed conditions so that the transmission of foodborne illness (FBI) can be prevented

or minimized. By signing the conditional employee reporting agreement, any employee who has a reportable symptom, diagnosis, or is exposed to any identified foodborne pathogen, now or in the future, agrees that they will and must inform the PIC of their condition or illness.

What are Reportable Symptoms? Vomiting, diarrhea, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), sore throat with fever, or an infected wound, cut, lesion or boil on the hands, wrists, arms or other exposed body part.

Sick food handlers exhibiting reportable symptoms must be excluded from working in food establishments and cannot return to work until they have been symptom free for a minimum of 48 hours. The only exception to this is if the employee has an infected wound, cut, lesion or boil and it can be bandaged and covered properly to prevent exposure, the employee may continue to work.

What is a Reportable Diagnosis? The employee has been diagnosed with a foodborne illness (FBI) from one of the “Big 6” pathogens or any other foodborne pathogen.

Employees with a reportable diagnosis must be excluded from work, you must notify your local regulatory authority of the diagnosis, and the infected employee cannot return to work until they have been cleared by their medical practitioner and the appropriate regulatory authority (i.e. health department, department of agriculture, etc.).

What constitutes Reportable Exposure? If the employee has been exposed to an immediate family member living in the same household or someone that they are a caretaker for who has been diagnosed with a FBI; or, if the family member works in, or regularly attends, a setting where there is a confirmed disease outbreak of one of the “Big 6” pathogens, they must report this exposure to the PIC. Exposed employees should be restricted from working with food, and they should be educated on the possible symptoms associated with the FBI they were exposed to and reminded that they must report symptoms if they develop. They should also be retrained on proper personal hygiene practices, including handwashing and glove usage. The caveat to this rule is employees exposed to hepatitis A should be restricted for 30 days, unless they can show medical documentation of immunity through a previous hepatitis A virus infection or prior immunization.

Don’t let employees come to work when they’re sick. It sounds simple—black and white—but employee illness reporting and lack of reporting is a gray area. Some people are very uncomfortable sharing personal details of symptoms and illness diagnosis; however, in the foodservice industry, employees have an obligation to report these to the PIC to protect the guests that are dining there by keeping the food being prepared safe. On the other hand, some

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REPORTABLE SYMPTOMS

Vomiting, diarrhea, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), sore throat with fever, or an infected wound, cut, lesion or boil on the hands, wrists, arms, or other exposed body part.



REPORTABLE DIAGNOSIS

The employee has been diagnosed with a foodborne illness from one of the “Big 6” pathogens or any other foodborne pathogen.



REPORTABLE EXPOSURE

If the employee has been exposed to an immediate family member living in the same household or someone that they are a caretaker for who has been diagnosed with a foodborne illness; or, if the family member works in, or regularly attends, a setting where there is a confirmed disease outbreak of one of the “Big 6” pathogens, they must report this exposure to the person in charge (PIC).

employees don't report illness on purpose. For a variety of reasons employees come to work when they are sick and most revolve around not having sick leave time available, the need for a paycheck, or fear of losing their job for calling off. According to Healthy People 2020, the foodservice industry is faced with some key challenges when it comes to keeping the food being served safe through illness reporting, awareness and education, including:

- Large employee populations with high rates of turnover, communication challenges, and cultural differences in how food is prepared
- Non-uniform systems for training and certifying workers
- Lack of sick leave policies for sick workers

As managers, we must change the mindset and begin building the foundation for a food safety culture within our operations to empower and educate employees regarding the importance of food safety and help them connect the dots between their health and the overall safety of our guests. Helping employees see the value of their contribution to food safety in a larger sense can provide them with meaning, understanding, and empowerment behind their actions and begin to foster the building blocks of a food safety culture within your foodservice operation.

REFERENCES

- Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Code 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.fda.gov/media/110822/download>
- Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Retail Food Protection: Employee Health and Personal Hygiene Handbook. Retrieved from: <https://www.fda.gov/food/retail-food-industryregulatory-assistance-training/retail-food-protection-employee-health-and-personal-hygiene-handbook>
- https://www.fda.gov/food/retail-food-industryregulatory-assistance-training/retail-food-protection-employee-health-and-personal-hygiene-handbook#employee_health
- <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/food-safety?topicid=14>

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This Level 1 article assumes that the reader has entry level knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a foundation of basic concepts of the subject matter.

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- The PIC at New Horizons Assisted Living observes one of the dishwashers vomiting in the restroom. Which procedures should be followed?
 - Call the regulatory authority immediately to report this
 - Exclude the dishwasher, send him home, and do not allow him to return to work until he has been symptom free for at least 48 hours
 - Educate the dishwasher on the importance of employee health reporting and good personal hygiene practices before returning to work in a restricted capacity
- Which is *not* one of the “Big 6” foodborne pathogens?
 - Norovirus
 - Shiga Toxin producing E. coli
 - Staphylococcus aureus
- Which reportable symptom does *not* automatically exclude an employee from work?
 - Infected wound, cut, lesion, or boil
 - Vomiting
 - Diarrhea
- Mary’s 2 year-old daughter has had diarrhea and vomiting for two days. When Mary takes her to the doctor the toddler is diagnosed with norovirus. Mary has to report this to the PIC at her workplace because it is a:
 - Reportable diagnosis
 - Reportable illness
 - Reportable exposure
- Which is *not* one of the key issues facing the foodservice industry in keeping food safe through employee illness reporting, education, and awareness?
 - Large employee populations with high rates of turnover, communication challenges, and cultural differences in how food is prepared
 - Lack of sick leave policies for sick workers
 - Both A & B are issues facing the industry
- Which one of the following is *not* required to be reported to the regulatory authority and have the affected employee cleared by them prior to returning to work?
 - Typhoid fever
 - Sore throat with fever
 - E. coli
- A *conditional employee* is one who has been offered employment, but has not yet started working, and they do not have to report illness or exposure to the employer until after they begin working at the establishment.
 - True
 - False

