



Helping you **identify**
and **manage** risk

Foodborne Illnesses in Educational Institutions

Approximately four million Canadians suffer a foodborne illness every year. 11,600 Canadians are hospitalized. 250 Canadians die each year due to a foodborne illness¹

Commonly called food poisoning, foodborne illness is the result of ingesting food that is contaminated with either bacteria (or their toxins) or other pathogens like parasites or viruses. Illnesses can range from an upset stomach to more severe symptoms — for example, diarrhea, vomiting, fever, abdominal cramps and dehydration. They can also result in chronic illnesses.

While everyone in the population is at risk, young children whose immune systems are not fully developed are particularly susceptible. In fact, it is difficult to predict how children will react to food poisoning. What is known is that children have a higher risk of complications from Foodborne illness

and that the outcomes can be very severe. That's why extreme caution must be exercised when serving food in schools. Providing tasty, nutritionally balanced and, most importantly, safe meals is critical to ensuring a healthy school environment.

It's important to note that a single outbreak of a foodborne illness can:

- have devastating impact upon the health of students, faculty, staff and visitors;
- derail classroom and student productivity;
- harm your school's reputation and good will; and
- result in legal action and financial liability.

Reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses

A food safety action plan is the first step in reducing risk and preventing foodborne illnesses.

Your plan should:

- Define mandatory food safety policies and procedures for food handlers and for everyone at the school who comes into contact with food;
- Outline steps for school-wide approaches to promoting food safety — for example, disseminating food handling information at the beginning of each school year, instituting a 'clean-hands' program, including food safety education in the curriculum; and
- Provide guidelines for food that students may bring to school, whether prepared at home or purchased.

The plan should articulate food handling procedures that must be stringently followed, and address each of the four key "at-risk" stages. Ideally, the plan should address a range of issues, including:

1. PURCHASE OF FOOD AND SUPPLIES

Whether your school purchases raw or prepared food, make sure that you are dealing with suppliers and distributors who have solid track records, excellent reputations, and references.

2. TAKING DELIVERY OF FOOD AND SUPPLIES

- The receiving area must be clean and free of food debris, boxes, cans, or other refuse.
- Delivery vehicles should be visually inspected to assess their cleanliness.
- To prevent cross contamination, ready-to-eat and raw foods should not be delivered in the same vehicle.
- All deliveries are to be examined upon arrival for signs of contamination — including insect and rodent damage, infestation, mould and other signs of spoilage.

3. FOOD STORAGE

- Refrigerators and freezers must be clean, well organized and kept at the proper temperatures.
- Perishable items must be stored in the refrigerator or freezer as quickly as possible.

- Fresh vegetables should be stored separately from dairy products and raw foods.
- All food should be properly wrapped and date-labelled.
- Non-perishable items should not be stored on the floor.

4. FOOD PREPARATION

Food preparation is the most important stage in the process of keeping foods safe to eat. It also carries the greatest risk for contamination. Your plan should include detailed procedures and protocols for each aspect of food handling. Some examples:

Personal hygiene

- Employees must be properly attired, including shoes and hair restraints.
- Smocks, aprons, or uniforms are to be kept clean and changed often.
- Hands are to be washed properly and frequently — one of the best ways to prevent the spread of foodborne illness. Washing hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water must be a mandatory step before and after any type of food preparation.
- Employees may not handle food when they are ill.
- Disposable gloves are to be worn if an employee has a bandaged cut, burn, or abrasion.
- Gloves are to be discarded after each use as they can harbour more bacteria than if the employee's hands were bare.

Work spaces and utensils

- All equipment must conform to applicable provincial / territorial Public Health Act Food Regulations.
- Utensils, equipment, sinks, and work surfaces must be clean and sanitized.
- Once washed, utensils should be air dried or dried with clean towels.
- Towels that have been used in raw food preparation are to be changed after each use.
- Separate cutting boards and chopping blocks are to be used for raw and prepared foods.

Food Preparation Guidelines

- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly to remove micro-organisms, dirt and pesticides.
- Handle potentially hazardous foods quickly. Work with small amounts of food, do the necessary preparation and then return the food to the cooler, cook it or serve it.
- Chill salad and sandwich ingredients prior to assembly. Refrigerate prepared items quickly, in shallow layers, to speed cooling.
- Prepare small quantities of breading or batter mixtures, and use them quickly.
- Refrigerate leftovers immediately after use.
- Use a clean, single-service utensil when tasting prepared foods, then immediately dispose of it to prevent accidental re-use.
- Maintain temperatures that are appropriate for the type of food being prepared, cooked and served. Ensure hot foods are kept hot and cold foods, cold. Use a food thermometer to confirm that food is cooked to a sufficient temperature and safe to eat. Temperature guidelines for various food products can be obtained from your provincial or regional health department.
- Use utensils to handle ready-to-eat foods; using bare hands should be kept at an absolute minimum.
- Prevent cross contamination of food. Do not allow ready to eat foods to come into contact with work surfaces, equipment, utensils or hands that have been in contact with raw foods.

Conclusion

Education, information and training are the best ways to prevent a foodborne illness. Create checklists, post notices, have regular inspections. Present seminars on food handling safety, develop employee orientation material, and involve all stakeholders in your efforts to make your school a “food-safe” school.

While it would be ideal to have all kitchen staff certified in food handling and preparation, this may not always be possible. Note, however, that each

province regulates how many, and which, employees must be food certified based on the type of facility and the number of employees working in the kitchen. Food certification courses are normally offered through your regional or provincial health board.

¹ Health Canada

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