**Food safety tips to remember ahead of the holidays**

I have taught food sanitation for many years. Yes, it is extremely important for hospitality institutions to follow all the rules and regulations in order to serve foods that are safe for the public. It is mind-boggling to see that many times, even though the safety rules are not followed, luckily, nothing ever happens.

However, sometimes a minor incident can lead to a major disaster.

I lived in San Diego for many years; it is my old stomping ground since my college days. I remember that there was a restaurant called Gulliver’s back in the 1970s. They specialized in serving prime rib, and folks were willing to wait an hour for a table.

Remember Gulliver the traveler, who ventured to the lands with giants and then the land with small people? All the settings and costumes in the restaurant were designed to revive your imagination. It was the place to be, and it was one of the most popular restaurants in town. Then, one day, disaster hit.

A customer called the health department and complained that he got sick after dining at the restaurant. Upon investigation, the health department found that one of the cooks had been infected with hepatitis A, which is transmitted from human feces or contaminated seafood.

It was a simple safety issue which could be corrected immediately. However, the manager in charge was arrogant and refused to work with the health inspector in addressing those issues. So, the health inspector filed a report and sent a message to the local media, announcing that any customer who had dined at the restaurant within a certain period had to go to the nearest hospital for a medical checkup to ensure that they did not contract hepatitis A and so that they would not infect others around them.

The whole city was in turmoil, as everyone was in fear of being infected. And guess what happened to the business? It went downhill and never recovered. Last time when I visited San Diego, the once-popular restaurant had been torned down and replaced by a hotel instead. A sad, but true, story.

A lot of us don’t pay much attention in our own homes, thinking that bad things only happen in restaurants. Not true at all. Folks get sick not only by eating spoiled foods, but it can also be caused by many other factors:

* **Household chemicals.** Do not set bleach or ammonia, or any cleaning agent next to food items; store them in a place away from food items. Do not ever mix ammonia and bleach together, it creates a poisonous fume that can cause death!
* **Physical materials** such as staples from boxes, broken glass, hair, bandages and bones.
* **Foods not fully cooked**, especially chicken, which can carry salmonella, and raw hamburger, which can carry E. coli.
* **Foods not held properly**. Cold foods that are held under 40 degrees and hot foods that are held above 140 degrees are considered safe. Anything in between is considered dangerous, as bacteria multiply by the millions between 40 and 140 degrees. This is the danger zone. So, eating an egg sandwich that has been left on the counter for two to three hours at room temperature can mean disaster!
* **Using contaminated utensils.** That can be the knives, cutting board, or towel that we use. Think about it; using the same knife that we just finished cutting raw chicken with to slice an apple. Or, using the same cutting board to cut lettuce after using the board to make hamburger patties. That’s called cross-contamination. And it is the root of many food-poisoning incidents.

Sizzler was once a very popular restaurant chain, with restaurants in different states and even in foreign countries. And because of a minor cross-contamination incident, the chain no longer exists. It is another true, but sad, story.

A little girl got sick and died after eating a salad at one of the Sizzler restaurants. Later, they found out the lettuce from the salad had been contaminated.

While the lettuce was being washed in a prep sink, another prep cook was making hamburger patties right next to the sink. Somehow, a small bit of hamburger meat fell into the prep sink. No big deal, right? But, that small piece of hamburger meat was contaminated with E. coli bacteria that can make people sick. When cooked properly, it would be fine. However, the whole batch of salad was contaminated by one little piece of hamburger meat.

After eating the salad, the little girl fell violently ill, and she died not long afterward. The parents were devastated, as that little girl was their miracle child. The restaurant had been warned by the health department before but did nothing to prevent further incidents. A big lawsuit followed and the chain disappeared, all because of one incident. No matter how large the compensation was, it could not replace the loss of a precious life.

Bacteria are harmful microorganisms that live amongst us. Those that prompt sickness are harmful but others can be beneficial, such as the yeasts we use in making bread and brewing beer. I will write more on sanitation standards. But meanwhile, start creating a sanitized environment in your own kitchen:

* **Cook food properly**. Use a food thermometer to ensure that the meat is cooked at the right temperature: seafood, eggs and steaks at 145 F; hamburger, ham and roasts at 155 F; and chicken, turkey and stuffing at 165 F.
* **Wash your hands** with soap and hot water before, during and after prepping food.
* **Sanitize your knives and cutting board** after prepping each item. Prep vegetables and fruits first, then meat items afterward to prevent cross-contamination.
* **Be aware of the danger zone** between 40 F and 140 F. Never leave food within the danger zone, as bacteria multiply by the millions within a second.

Good luck. Stay healthy and be happy.

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