

Protect Your Ministry from a Food Poisoning Outbreak

HOW TO PREPARE AND SERVE FOOD SAFELY

At a church fellowship dinner, it's possible for one contaminated dish to sicken an entire congregation. That's why it's so important to follow safe food preparation and serving guidelines.

If your ministry serves food, determine whether your facilities are adequate and your volunteers are following proper health guidelines and procedures. If necessary, enlist the help of your local cooperative extension service or health department to develop a training program for those who work in the kitchen. In addition, consider obtaining food preparation liability insurance to protect you from food-related lawsuits.

MINISTRIES AREN'T IMMUNE

You might think that ministries would be immune from food-related lawsuits, but they're not. Consider a Longville, Minnesota, case in which a woman died and 17 people fell ill. Health investigators traced the outbreak to some E. coli contaminated meatballs that were served at a Church potluck. The church was sued, even though the meat was traced to the grocer who sold the beef and the slaughterhouse that supplied the beef.

CONDUCT AN ASSESSMENT

- Make a list of all of the types of events your church engages in that involve food. Consider events where your kitchen is responsible for the food as well as events where food is carried in from the outside. This will help you determine the risk factors within your church.
- Talk with your local board of health to determine if you are following the guidelines for churches and church schools or programs. Work with them to ensure that you are following safe food preparation and serving practices.
- Look within your congregation and enlist the help of anyone who might have knowledge of safe health practices to help you with your kitchen areas.

- Talk with food preparers in your church kitchen to determine what food preparation guidelines they currently follow.
- Ask your food preparers if they feel they would benefit from additional food preparation training. Begin an education program, if needed. For additional information and support, you may wish to seek out a food preparation class in your area that is offered by a local university or government agency, such as your county extension office.
- Consider posting safe food preparation and handling signs in your kitchen where they are easily seen and referenced.
- Examine your kitchen, its storage, and its existing equipment, to eliminate the potential for food contamination. Use thermometers in refrigerators and ovens to test for proper temperatures, and consider whether you have adequate serving equipment to keep food at the proper temperatures while serving.
- Talk with your insurance agent to be sure that your church is covered. If it is, ask if you have adequate coverage for the types of events you sponsor. Determine how much coverage you need and the guidelines required for you to stay within legal parameters.

FOLLOW FOOD PREPARATION GUIDELINES

Following these recommendations from the Food Safety Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture can help reduce the likelihood of spreading foodborne illnesses.

KEEP IT CLEAN

- Always wash your hands thoroughly before and after handling food.
- Keep your kitchen, countertops, cutting boards, dishes and utensils clean and sanitized.

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SEPARATE MEATS

- Where possible, separate raw vegetable and meat food preparation areas.
- Always serve food on clean plates and with clean utensils—do not serve with anything that touched raw meat or poultry. Otherwise, bacteria that may have been present in raw meat juices can cross contaminate the food to be served.

COOK THOROUGHLY

Cook foods thoroughly to achieve safe minimum internal temperatures:

- Beef, veal, and lamb steaks, roasts, and chops may be cooked to 145° F.
- All cuts of pork to 160° F.
- Ground beef, veal and lamb to 160° F.
- All poultry should reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165° F.

USE SMALL CONTAINERS

- Divide cooked foods into shallow containers to store in the refrigerator or freezer until serving. This encourages rapid, even cooling. Reheat hot foods to 165° F.
- Arrange and serve food on several small platters rather than on one large platter. Keep the rest of the food hot in the oven (set at 200 - 250° F) or cold in the refrigerator until serving time. Doing this ensures that foods are held at safe temperatures for longer periods of time.
- Replace empty platters rather than adding fresh food to a dish that already had food in it. Many people's hands may have been taking food from the dish, which has also been sitting out at room temperature.

OBEY THE TWO-HOUR RULE

- Foods should not sit at room temperature for more than two hours.
- Keep track of how long foods have been sitting on serving tables and discard anything that has been there for two hours or more.

KEEP HOT FOODS HOT

- Hot foods should be held at 140°F or warmer.
- On a serving table, you can keep hot foods hot with chafing dishes, slow cookers, and warming trays.

KEEP COLD FOODS COLD

- Cold foods should be held at 40° F or colder.
- Keep foods cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice. Otherwise, use small serving trays and replace them.

For more information about preparing and serving food safely, visit the following Web sites or check with your county extension office or local board of health.

Food Safety and Inspection Service

www.fsis.usda.gov/Food_Safety_Education/index.asp

United States Department of Agriculture

www.usda.gov

Foodborne Illness Education Information Center

www.nal.usda.gov/foodborne/wais.shtml

Centers for Disease Control

www.cdc.gov/foodsafety

Multiple Government Sources

www.foodsafety.gov