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Food for thought

A newsletter for Fairfax County food establishment owners and operators and their employees

Warm Weather is Coming!

Potentially hazardous food must be kept at 41°F or less to prevent bacteria from growing and making people sick. As warm weather approaches and temperatures rise in the kitchen, refrigerators may struggle to maintain 41°F. Most refrigerators run best at room temperatures below 85°F. Now is the time to take steps to keep your refrigerators running properly and to keep your food at a safe storage temperature. Here are three steps to help keep your refrigerators cold and the food at the safe temperature:

1) **Service refrigerators and freezers ahead of the hot summer season.** If a refrigerator reads 41°F two hours before opening, it likely will not maintain that temperature during the busy lunch rush. Set the temperature at 35° to 37°F when the refrigerators are not in use. Check refrigerator temperatures first thing in the morning. If refrigerators are set at the correct temperature, they should keep food at 41°F or less, even during the busy times of business.

2) **Ensure all refrigerators have a built-in temperature gauge or an internal thermometer.** Refrigeration units under and across from the cookline can be a challenge because they may have to work harder to maintain 41°F. Check temperatures throughout the day. Your area inspector can help you set up a temperature log, if necessary. If food temperatures are going up, adjust the refrigerator setting and temporarily move the food to another refrigerator that will keep the proper temperature.

3) **Refrigerate food right away.** When food is delivered, put it in the refrigerator quickly. When left

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Food Safety Reminders

- Wash Hands Often!
- Don't handle ready-to-eat foods with bare hands.
- Report symptoms of foodborne illness to management.
- Food must come from an approved source.
- Cook foods to proper temperatures.
- Use a food thermometer!
- Keep hot foods ***HOT*** — above 135°F.
- Keep cold foods ***COLD*** — below 41°F.
- Keep foods out of the ***Danger Zone*** (41°F - 135°F).
- Wash, rinse and sanitize food-contact surfaces regularly.
- Wash Hands Often!

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Ice is Food, Too

Ice, like all food ingredients, is subject to contamination if not handled correctly. It is easy to overlook that that ice, like all food, can be the cause of a foodborne illness outbreak. You may think that the cold temperature of ice kills bacteria; however, the cold temperature does not necessarily kill the bacteria—it may merely preserve the germs until conditions are better for rapid bacteria growth, which can lead to contamination. Cold temperatures slow germ production, but when ice begins to melt, conditions improve for bacteria growth and germ populations can explode. If a beverage is cooled by contaminated ice or food is stored in contaminated ice, a foodborne illness may be transmitted to people when the beverage or food is consumed. Because ice has very little defense against germs once it begins to melt, it is important to prevent contamination from the start.

Handling ice with contaminated hands or utensils is the most common cause of illness linked to ice. The most effective way to prevent ice contamination is to use dedicated ice scoops and buckets and to train employees never to handle ice with their bare hands. Ice-only utensils (ice scoops) will help prevent cross-contamination from other potentially hazardous foods, such as red meat, poultry or fish. In addition, keep ice bins clean. Another important step is to clean ice machines and ice bins regularly to prevent soil and mold buildup. Proper cleaning means turning the machine off, emptying the contents and washing, rinsing and sanitizing the inside of the bin, as well as the underside of the door and the door gasket. When in use, cover ice bins and store the scoop in a clean area that is protected from contamination.

Remember, the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) considers ice to be a food. Protect ice from contamination just as you would protect any other ready-to-eat food ingredient. If you have any questions, please contact the Health Department or your field inspector.

Warm Weather is coming!

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unrefrigerated, the food temperature will quickly move into the "danger zone" (41° - 135°F). In the "danger zone," foodborne bacteria can grow more quickly and possibly make people sick.

Proper refrigeration and temperature control of foods are important steps in reducing the risk of foodborne illness. The Health Department encourages you to take time now to make sure your refrigerators will get you through the summer season.

Your Feedback is Important!

On February 3, 2014, the Fairfax County Health Department started a new quality assurance (QA) program in its Consumer Protection Program. Through the QA program, we will assess how well the inspection process is working. One aspect of the QA program is to collect feedback from our customers, the food service establishment operators. We hope to gather this feedback through a 10-question phone survey that is completed by the manager or the person in charge—whoever will be most familiar with the most recent inspection at the time of the call. Beginning in April 2014, the Health Department will make these calls randomly throughout the year. If you have any questions about this program, please contact the Health Department at 703-246-2444, TTY 711.

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