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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 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) Have the refrigerators and freezers serviced ahead of the hot summer season. If a refrigerator reads 41°F two hours before opening, it is doubtful that it will keep that temperature during the busy lunch rush. Set the temperature to be 35°-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) Refrigeration units under and across from the cookline can be a challenge because they may have to work harder to maintain 41°F. All refrigerators must have a built-in temperature gauge or an internal thermometer. 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 a refrigerator that will keep the proper temperature.

3) When food is delivered, put it in the refrigerator quickly. When left 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 is very important 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.

## 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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# The 3-Legged Stool

Food safety equals the prevention of foodborne illness. The Food Safety 3-Legged Stool is the foundation on which food safety rests. If one of the legs is missing, the stool cannot stand and the risk of foodborne illness increases. The legs of the stool are: 1) proper handwashing; 2) no bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods; and 3) employee health. These are also referred to as interventions. An intervention is a method of preventing the spread of foodborne illness.

Proper handwashing includes not only washing thoroughly—scrubbing and washing hands for 20 seconds—but also timely handwashing. It is not just how employees wash their hands, but when they wash their hands. Are hands washed before a work shift begins? Are hands washed when gloves are changed? Are hands washed when changing tasks? Are hand sinks functional with warm water, soap and paper towels?

Bare hands always have the possibility of spreading foodborne germs through cross-contamination, regardless of proper handwashing. Examples of bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat-foods are: mixing salad lettuce with bare hands in the prep kitchen; handling bread and deli meats with bare hands at the sandwich prep line; and placing cooked foods on plates with bare hands. The use of single-use disposable gloves is a very good way to prevent bare-hand contact.

The final leg of the three-legged stool is employee health. Through an enforced employee health policy, employees should recognize the symptoms of foodborne illness and know to inform management when they experience symptoms of, are diagnosed with, or are exposed to foodborne illness. Management should then determine whether the employee's work duties should continue as usual, whether the duties should be restricted or whether the employee should be excluded from the workplace entirely.

All three legs of the food safety 3-legged stool must be in place in a food establishment to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. If you have any questions regarding food safety interventions, contact your area inspector or the Health Department at 703-246-2444, TTY 711.

# What to Do in an Electrical Outage

In the event of a power outage, the establishment should voluntarily close. Notify the Health Department of the closure by calling 703-246-2444, TTY 711.

An electrical power outage will affect the safe storage of refrigerated and frozen foods. Perishable food such as meat, poultry, seafood, milk and eggs that are not kept properly refrigerated or frozen may cause illness if eaten. To protect these foods from spoiling, follow these guidelines:

- **Keep a digital dial, or instant-read thermometer** inside refrigerators and freezers to accurately monitor the temperatures until power is restored.
- **Refrigerator and freezer doors must be kept closed as much as possible** to maintain the cold temperature. The refrigerator will keep foods cold for 2 to 4 hours if it is unopened. Full freezers will hold the temperature for approximately 48 hours if the door remains closed. These times may vary depending on age of the unit, temperature setting and amount of food that is inside the refrigerator.
- **Foods that are above 41ºF for more than 2 hours must be discarded.** Don't trust your sense of smell. Food may be unsafe even if it doesn't smell bad.
- **Thawed food may be used if it is still below 41°F** or it may be re-frozen if it still contains ice crystals or is below 41°F. Partial thawing and refreezing may reduce the quality of some food, but the food will remain safe.

Follow the **Golden Rule** of food safety, **"When in Doubt, Throw it Out,"** for any foods that you are not sure have stayed at a safe temperature.

When the electricity comes back on, contact the Health Department to let them know that the establishment has re-opened.

# Food Recalls

Periodically, there will be a recall of a food product by the manufacturer. The recall notice will describe the steps to take if you have a recalled product in your inventory. The main thing to remember is that a recalled food product may not be used in food preparation for your customers. You can get more information about food recalls by visiting www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hd/food or www.foodsafety.gov. The Health Department recommends that you check for recall updates weekly or sign up for automated alerts that are emailed directly to you.

## Stay Connected!

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