

From farm to fork: Eating outside the home and the risks involved

06 November 2006

The consumer must follow basic safety precautions when eating in public places.

Eating Out

One link in the food chain from farm to fork which deserves special attention is the preparation of meals outside the home - restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, child care establishments, schools, canteens, aeroplanes, wedding parties, business conventions, etc.

Considering the vast number of meals consumed in such public settings, professional chefs and caterers do an outstanding job of protecting the public against foodborne disease. However, while the incidence of problems in public places is very low, when something does go wrong, it tends to attract wide public attention. Since they usually affect a large number of people, such incidents are more often than not investigated by an official inquiry. In contrast, individual incidents of disease in the home are rarely reported at all.

As a result of investigations into institutional incidents, efforts have been made to inform and educate professional food-handlers as well as the consumer in an attempt to avoid similar problems in the future. Such investigations have led to strict industrial hygiene procedures and, specifically, to the adoption of a system known as Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) which is used to ensure quality in food processing plants.

Some special procedures followed in public settings are:

- Where large numbers of meals are prepared in advance and/or far from the point of eventual consumption - schools or nursing homes or on trains and aeroplanes - facilities for hot holding or cooling must be carefully controlled to avoid problems resulting in people becoming ill from eating contaminated food.
- When large groups of people are served meals prepared on lines that are not designed for such quantities, catering personnel should be particularly careful to avoid contamination.
- At public events where food should look artistic as well as taste good, food service professionals face additional challenges. Raw decorations (parsley, shrimps, etc.) may result in food being handled more than is usual to acquire the desired effect. As a consequence, undesirable micro-organisms may enter an otherwise safe food dish.
- Lastly, while the food processing industry produces a relatively limited number of products using relatively standardised methods, food service establishments change recipes daily and often prepare several different dishes at the same time and in the same facility. Under these circumstances, professional food-handlers should take particular precautions to avoid cross-contamination among raw materials or between raw food and finished products.



In spite of all these efforts, there are occasional incidents of foodborne disease originating in public places. Therefore, the individual consumer also has an important role to play in ensuring his or her own safety.

The basic rules to follow include: only eating food which is piping hot, refusing food which has been left standing for too long, and avoiding food which should be cold but which is in fact lukewarm.

As in the home, food that looks or smells odd should be avoided.

Because hygiene in the kitchen is so important, the consumer should look for recognised certificates of good hygiene in public places.

A consumer who suffers from food allergies should be particularly cautious in public places, even avoiding certain foods unless assured that there is no risk of contamination.

All in all, paying attention to the obvious signs of food quality is especially important in order to protect individuals with a higher risk of foodborne disease.