

ACTION BY: District Offices  
State Agencies

Food Poisoning Outbreaks

I BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Every year there are many cases of intestinal type illnesses (gastro-enteritis) of epidemic proportions throughout the country. Some of the reported epidemics occur in schools. The onset of acute nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, prostration, etc., can be attributed to a variety of causes, such as communicable diseases or consumption of adulterated foods (foods containing ingredients which are injurious to health) and/or bacteria-contaminated foods. If the outbreak is of food origin, it should be realized that practically all food-borne illnesses can be prevented, provided the food was originally safe for human consumption and that the food is prepared and served in a sanitary manner by healthy food service personnel. Experience has shown that the majority of reported food poisoning outbreaks are the result of gross carelessness and unsanitary food handling practices.

Formula for Food Poisoning



Food poisoning may be divided into two types--food intoxication and food infection.

Food intoxication generally results from the consumption of foods containing a poisonous substance in a quantity sufficient to make it injurious to health. The harmful element might be the toxins (by-products) of such bacteria as Staphylococcus Aureus, Clostridium Botulinum, Welchii, etc., or such chemicals as arsenic, lead, etc. The symptoms of Staphylococcus intoxication generally occur within a few hours following consumption of contaminated food; whereas Clostridium intoxication can occur from several hours to several days.

Food infection generally results from the consumption of food contaminated with pathogenic (disease-producing) bacteria such as the members of the genus Salmonella and Shigella. Symptoms of this type of food poisoning usually occur within 6 to 72 hours following consumption of contaminated food.

When an outbreak of gastro-intestinal illness occurs, DO NOT PANIC. Hand over information as requested by the proper authorities so that the cause of the outbreak can be properly determined and steps can be instituted to prevent such future incidents.

Determining the type and cause of food poisoning can be a complicated matter. It sometimes involves laboratory tests on suspected foods and/or victims' blood, vomit and excreta. Therefore, it is extremely important that the school officials immediately notify and give maximum assistance to the local board of health when a food poisoning outbreak does occur. It is a good food service policy to collect a sample of each food served during the day and hold it under refrigeration for 48 hours before discarding.

## II PROCEDURES TO FOLLOW IN CASE OF FOOD POISONING OUTBREAK

It is suggested that any school that becomes aware of an outbreak of food poisoning take the following action:

1. Immediately notify the local health authorities and
  - a. volunteer all information as requested;
  - b. hand over samples of all foods served during the past 48 hours to the local health authorities;
  - c. with the assistance of the local health authorities, determine what locally purchased or donated food items used in the meal might be suspect in the food poisoning outbreak.
2. Place suspected food item(s) in HOLD STATUS.

3. Immediately report the incident to the State School Lunch Agency and/or State Distributing Agency, and include the following information:

- a. Name and location of health authorities notified
- b. Nature of illness
  - 1. symptoms of illness
  - 2. severity of symptoms
  - 3. time at which symptoms of illness became evident
  - 4. duration of illness.
- c. Percent of students affected

Approximate percent of students affected who participated in the School Feeding Program for the past 48 hours.

**Formula:**

$$\boxed{\begin{array}{l} \text{Number of students} \\ \text{involved in food} \\ \text{poisoning outbreak} \end{array}} + \boxed{\begin{array}{l} \text{Total number of} \\ \text{meals sold on sus-} \\ \text{pected day of food} \\ \text{poisoning} \end{array}} \times 100 = \boxed{\begin{array}{l} \% \text{ of students} \\ \text{affected who} \\ \text{participated} \\ \text{in SL programs} \end{array}}$$

- d. Statement of employees' health to include any indication
  - 1. communicable diseases
  - 2. acute respiratory infections
  - 3. infected cuts
  - 4. boils
  - 5. others
- e. List of all food items served during past 48 hours

For school-prepared items, give USDA recipe card file number. Otherwise give the recipe and procedures followed in preparing and storing protein-rich foods, such as the main dish, sandwiches, salads, etc.

f. Listing of suspected foods in HOLD STATUS

4. Once the cause of the food poisoning outbreak has been determined by the local health authorities, release all food items in BOLD STATUS that were not directly responsible for the food-borne illness. For food items involved, maintain in HOLD STATUS, inventory supplies and record the following:

- a. Packer or contract number under which processed
- b. Date purchased or received
- c. Quantity on hand
- d. Methods and conditions of storage

5. Send a written report to the State School Lunch Agency and/or State Distributing Agency including the local health authorities' findings and listing of all food items in HOLD STATUS with pertinent information as outlined under 4 above.


III RELEASE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

Food poisoning incidents, especially those involving school children attract local news media attention. School officials are usually the first to be contacted by newsmen, either in person or by telephone. Through the years, specific foods--and frequently USDA-donated foods--have been unjustly accused in the headlines because a reporter succeeded in pressuring a spokesman into guessing at the cause of a food poisoning outbreak. In newspaper parlance, report of the exact findings is a "second day" story that does not rate comparable headlines. Thus the first impression is usually the one retained by the public. Therefore, in dealing with the news media it is suggested that you:

1. Give reporters all the facts that you know.
2. Don't speculate.
3. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."
4. Refer them to the local health authorities, who are investigating the case.

IV Action by State Agencies and CFP District Offices

Because the effects of food poisoning can be so detrimental to the health and well-being of our school children and to the continued public support of the school lunch program, it is highly recommended that State Agencies and CFP District Offices (with respect to CFPDO-administered private schools) make the above information available to all participating schools through the monthly newsletter or other means and periodically remind participating schools of the need for constant vigilance.

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**Deputy Administrator**  
**Consumer Food Programs**