



Food Safety is in Our Hands The importance of Hand-washing

The Institute of Food Science & Technology, through its Public Affairs and Technical & Legislative Committees, has authorised this Advisory Statement, dated 24 March 2003, as an IFST contribution to the 11th Foodlink National Food Safety Week which runs from 9 - 15 June 2003, organised by Foodlink.

SUMMARY

Much scientific effort goes into making food as safe as possible up to the point of purchase. Thereafter, as consumers, or as preparers of food for others, it is in our hands to keep it safe. There are many important things that we should do and precautions that we should take. Our hands are one of the main ways in which harmful micro-organisms can be transmitted to food or to kitchen surfaces which can then be a source of contamination. We can deal with that risk by washing our hands (and surfaces) thoroughly and frequently. Thus helping to prevent cross-contamination of ready-to-eat foods.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of effort to make food as safe as possible is devoted by

- Scientists and technologists in food manufacture and retailing, applying existing knowledge to the manufacture and sale of safe foods
- Enforcement officers, including food scientists and technologists, monitoring food manufacturers, caterers and retailers to make sure that the food provided complies with legal safety and other requirements.
- Researchers continually seeking new knowledge about all aspects of food safety.

How can we, as consumers, keep that food safe once it is purchased? And how can we ensure the safety of dishes that we prepare “from scratch” in the home? What practices and precautions can we adopt to prevent food poisoning organisms contaminating and multiplying in our food? There are several very important practices we can follow and precautions we can take. Here we offer advice on the importance of thoroughly and frequently washing our hands. We are all consumers, but some of us work in food manufacture, in food retailing and in catering, and of course the hand-washing advice is just as important to follow in our work.

First we need to understand the sources of food poisoning micro-organisms (the term often used is “germs” but scientists refer to “pathogens”).

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They are too small to be seen with the naked eye, and exist harmlessly in many natural environments, for example farmyards and farm animals, poultry and wild birds and on

fields that are fertilised with farmyard manure. Animals, and people suffering from food-poisoning, can also shed large numbers of these micro-organisms, either through sickness or diarrhoea. Some are carried normally by healthy people (hence the need for hand-washing – see below).

Insects, rodents and other pests ('vermin') as well as domestic pets can also harbour pathogens and transfer them from one place to another.

Pathogens can contaminate food; some can multiply at an enormous rate, given favourable conditions, especially of moisture and warmth; and can survive if not properly heated to destroy them. So “keeping it safe” means measures to prevent contamination, to prevent multiplication and to prevent survival.

WASH HANDS (AND SURFACES) THOROUGHLY AND FREQUENTLY

In safety terms, cross-contamination means the transfer of pathogens from one food to another, either directly or indirectly. Our hands and kitchen surfaces are among the main potential causes of direct contamination of foods with pathogens.

We need to wash our hands thoroughly and frequently, before handling food, immediately after handling (for example) raw meat or raw poultry or raw vegetables, and immediately after going to the toilet. Hand-washing should be in hot soapy water, with particular attention to nails and fingertips. Moisten the hands, apply soap, and rub hands together for about 20 seconds before rinsing thoroughly in clean water (children might be encouraged to recite the whole of “Three Blind Mice” while hand-washing, to judge the time needed).

While preparing foods, avoid touching cats, dogs or other pets, and avoid touching your mouth, nose or hair; but if you accidentally do, immediately wash the hands thoroughly before continuing.

It is also important to dry hands thoroughly after washing, using clean disposable paper towels, not a repeatedly-used cloth.

...AND A REMINDER OF THE OTHER IMPORTANT SAFETY MEASURES WE SHOULD TAKE

This Advisory paper is about the importance of hand-washing; but it would be incomplete without reminding ourselves of the range of important measures that make up the “ring of safety” around foods in the home.

1. wash hands and surfaces thoroughly and frequently;
2. prevent cross-contamination of ready-to-eat foods;

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3. cook foods properly, to reach at least 70°C at the centre for 2 minutes;
4. store foods properly; keep hot foods hot (above 63°C) and cold foods cold (below 5°C).
5. pay strict attention to storage instructions, and to “use by” dates where these are given on the pack.

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Competence, integrity, and serving the public benefit lie at the heart of IFST philosophy. At all times IFST aims to:

- Benefit the public supply of safe, wholesome, nutritious, tasty and attractive food through the application of sound science and technology;
- Improve public knowledge and awareness of important issues relating to the supply, production, safety and quality of food;
- Develop and communicate the knowledge underlying food science and technology, and further the education of food scientists and technologists;
- Safeguard the public by defining, promoting, and upholding professional standards of competence, integrity and ethical behaviour; and
- Maintain these standards by encouraging members to continue their professional education and development throughout their careers.

In serving the public benefit IFST takes into account the many elements that are important for the efficient and responsible supply, manufacture and distribution of safe, wholesome, nutritious, and affordable foods with due regard for the environment, animal welfare and the rights of consumers.

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