

EMPLOYEE HANDWASHING PRACTICES IN SCHOOL FOODSERVICE OPERATIONS

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Introduction

- Personal hygiene and handwashing are among the top five factors related to foodborne illness outbreaks in foodservice establishments (FDA, 2000, 2004, 2009; Harrington, 1992).
- The FDA found that elementary school employees practice proper, adequate handwashing in 72.5% of observations and prevented hands from contamination in 91.4% of observations (FDA, 2009).
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that handwashing lasts at least 20 seconds with clean, running water, soap, and means of drying (clean towels or an air dryer) (FDA, 2009).
- Handwashing limits the spread of highly contagious diseases in schools, yet there has been limited research exploring actual behavior of school foodservice employees.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to assess the handwashing practices of employees in school foodservice operations.

Methodology

- A convenience sample of 34 districts were selected and recruited. Districts in each of the seven USDA regions were represented.
- The sample included:
 - 11 small districts (<2,500 students)
 - 9 medium districts (2,500-19,999)
 - 6 large districts (20,000-39,999 students)
 - 8 mega districts (≥40,000)
- Six researchers conducted on-site observations of employee handwashing practices at one randomly-selected school in each of the 34 districts.
- To assure inter-rater reliability, extensive pilot testing was conducted and results were discussed after each observation until researchers were in agreement.

Results

- A total of 585 occasions when handwashing was required were observed and recorded.
- The majority of employees engaged in some handwashing prior to food preparation, but many times the handwashing was done improperly.
- Employees washed hands properly in only 21% of occasions when handwashing was required.
- Employees washed hands well between handling raw animal products and ready to eat foods, although little raw animal products were handled.
- The handwashing practice with the highest out-of-compliance percentage (81%) was handwashing after touching body parts, coughing/sneezing, blowing nose, or eating and drinking.

Conclusions

- Handwashing practices need to be improved.
- Emphasis should be given to proper handwashing techniques.
- These results will assist school foodservice directors in benchmarking their employee practices and will serve as a reminder to encourage handwashing.