



NATIONAL
**FOOD
SAFETY**
MONTH

Personal Hygiene and Food Safety



Personal hygiene—it's a sometimes sensitive and, well, personal subject. But it's one that restaurant owners and operators need to be comfortable addressing.

While everyone's standards of "cleanliness" may vary on an individual level, one place where they can't differ is in the restaurant. Poor personal hygiene creates contamination risks by allowing bacteria to thrive and easily spread to the food your customers eat.

It also increases employees' risk of getting sick and passing the illness, whether it's a virus, bacteria, or pathogen, to others when they handle food.

IN THIS GUIDE

We examine the role personal hygiene plays in food safety and share proper practices to keep your teams on the same page. Join us as we crack the code on proper personal hygiene in kitchens and help you protect your guests from foodborne illnesses.



WHAT IS PERSONAL HYGIENE?

We know that personal hygiene is essential. But what is it, exactly? Broadly speaking, personal hygiene encompasses practices that maintain the body's cleanliness, grooming, and protection from pathogens like bacteria.¹

In practice, good personal hygiene involves regular:

- 1 **Toothbrushing**
- 2 **Handwashing**
- 3 **Bathing or showering**
- 4 **Washing of clothing**
- 5 **Cleaning and maintaining nails**
- 6 **Covering of coughs and sneezes**
- 7 **Disposal of waste**



WHY IT MATTERS

No one likes to visit (or work at) a restaurant that seems to be staffed by unhygienic food handlers. What's more, transferring pathogens from the body to food is among the leading causes of foodborne illness outbreaks.

Neglecting personal hygiene significantly increases the chances of transferring pathogens onto food. Prioritizing effective personal cleanliness is one of the best ways to protect the health of your guests.

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2025, June 3). Hygiene Basics

²Holst, MM, et. al. (2025, March 13). Contributing factors of Foodborne Illness Outbreaks. National Outbreak Reporting System, United States, 2014-2022. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



CORE ELEMENTS OF PERSONAL HYGIENE

COMING INTO WORK CLEAN

One of the primary places for pathogens to be found is the skin and hair. There is a far greater risk of transferring pathogens onto food and equipment if a food handler does not follow a personal hygiene program and comes into work unclean. Showering or bathing before work is the only way this can be effectively and reliably accomplished and should be considered a requirement for all food handlers.



Practicing good personal hygiene includes maintaining clean hands and nails.

Make sure your staff's fingernails are trimmed, filed, and free from nail polish or false nails. It's also important for food handlers to keep their hands clean throughout their shift by knowing when, where, and how to wash their hands and wear gloves.



CLEAN WORK ATTIRE

Not only does dirty work attire leave a poor impression on guests, but it also puts their health at greater risk. Dirty, unwashed clothing has an increased risk of carrying pathogens that can be transferred onto food and cause foodborne illnesses.

What makes clean work attire so important is that dirty clothing doesn't even have to come into direct contact with the food, as the pathogens can easily be transferred from the clothing to the hands, and then onto food.



DRESS CODE GUIDELINES

The most effective way to ensure your staff is always arriving at work with properly cleaned attire is by establishing a dress code that includes standards for the cleanliness of work attire.

Examples of guidelines you will find in these dress codes include:

- Wear clean clothing daily.
- Recommend changing into work clothes at work.
- Store personal belongings such as street clothing, backpacks, electronic devices, and keys in designated areas that do not interact with food.
- Keep dirty clothing such as aprons, chef coats, and uniforms in an area that is away from food and prep areas.
- Remove rings, bracelets, and other jewelry that could contaminate or fall into food.
- Wear a clean hat or hair covering when prepping food, working in prep areas, or working in areas used to clean utensils or equipment. Wear a beard covering when necessary.
- Change soiled uniforms, including aprons, as necessary.



HYGIENE ON THE JOB: WHY HANDWASHING MATTERS

In the foodservice industry, we're often told when, where, and even how to wash our hands. **But not many people understand the science behind why we wash our hands.** To illustrate the importance of washing up, let's look at how germs are spread from hands to food.



GERMS CAN BE FOUND VIRTUALLY EVERYWHERE.

Most germs are harmless, although some germs are pathogenic and can cause illness in humans. Unless they exist in large enough numbers, these pathogens largely go undetected.



OUR HANDS TOUCH HUNDREDS OF OBJECTS AND SURFACES EVERY DAY,

and the germs from these objects are easily transferred onto our hands. In fact, our hands carry on average 3,200 different germs belonging to more than 150 species.³



WHEN WE TOUCH FOOD OR SURFACES THAT COME IN CONTACT WITH FOOD,

we transfer our germs onto that food. If someone is sick or has pathogens on their hands, the food they touch has the potential to spread foodborne illnesses.

³Pfizer. (2023). How Clean Are Your Hands?



HANDWASHING HELPS REDUCE THE SPREAD OF FOODBORNE ILLNESS BY:

Keeping Yourself Healthy

→ When we touch our eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands, we increase our chances of getting sick. The number one contributor to foodborne illness outbreaks in restaurants is transmission through a sick food handler.

Keeping Those Around You Healthy

→ We can spread harmful germs through direct contact, like a handshake, or by touching surfaces or utensils that will be used by someone else. Food service workers who display signs of illness should be sent home to recover. Staff should also be encouraged to report symptoms like nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea to management.

Preventing Food Contamination

→ Germs from unwashed hands can transfer to the things we touch, including food. These germs can multiply in certain foods, leading to contamination. Many foodborne illnesses are spread by food handlers who don't wash their hands after using the bathroom.



This is compounded by the fact that out of all the ways that foodservice handlers spread pathogens from the body to food, touching items with bare hands ranks supreme.

HOW TO WASH YOUR HANDS, AND WHY

STEP 1

Wet your hands and arms with running water.

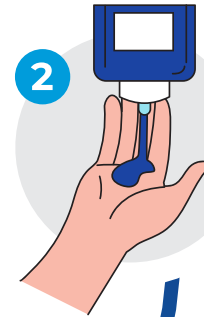
Why? Placing your hand in contaminated still water could re-contaminate your hands.



STEP 2

Apply enough soap to create a lather, and scrub gently.

Why? Lathering makes the soap easier to spread and creates friction, which helps loosen grease and dirt.



STEP 3

Vigorously scrub your hands and arms for at least 20 seconds.

Why? Studies show that washing hands for about 20 seconds removes more germs from hands than washing for shorter periods. Be sure to clean your fingertips, under your fingernails, and between your fingers.



STEP 4

Rinse hands and arms thoroughly under running water.

Why? The dirt, grease, and microbes loosened from scrubbing should be washed off the hands.



STEP 5

Dry hands and arms with a single-use paper towel or hand dryer.

Why? Germs transfer more easily onto wet hands. Reusable towels may harbor bacteria, and touching them after washing your hands could re-contaminate them. Be sure to also use a paper towel to turn off the faucet and, if leaving the restroom, to open the door.





POOR PERSONAL HYGIENE: TOP OFFENDERS

Many cases of hygiene and handwashing violations can be stopped in their tracks if you know what to look for. **Keep an eye out for these personal hygiene red flags:**

- Employees who don't wash their hands properly or frequently enough
- Lack of or improper maintenance of handwashing stations
- Food handlers who don't use gloves or don't change gloves in between tasks
- Employees who come to work ill or work with open cuts or wounds
- Improper use of hand sanitizer as a substitute for handwashing

THERE'S NOTHING PERSONAL ABOUT **PROPER HYGIENE**

Setting clear expectations for personal hygiene is the best way to ensure that your employees are compliant and confident. Proper training helps employees understand the what, why, and how behind the way their actions affect food safety risk.

ServSafe empowers you to promote a culture of cleanliness and safety with training and educational resources built for the restaurant industry.

Don't wait for foodborne illness outbreaks to strike—stop them in their tracks by making good personal hygiene a staple of your restaurant.



Visit **foodsafetyfocus.com** for more information on protecting your community from foodborne pathogens.



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