



GAP Practices: Worker Health and Hygiene In the Field

Worker health and hygiene in the field

- A worker food safety training program is in place
- Workers and supervisors practice good personal hygiene
- Field workers have easy access to toilet and handwashing facilities
- Supervisors are aware of the symptoms of foodborne illnesses
- Sick employees reassigned to duties where there is no direct contact with produce

Many fresh fruits and vegetables are eaten with little or no cooking--they are "ready to eat". Because they are not cooked, raw fruits and vegetables can be a source of disease-causing bacteria, viruses or parasites (pathogens). Foodborne disease outbreaks have been associated with raw tomatoes, carrots, sprouts, lettuce, cantaloupe, and cabbage.

Humans and animals are the major source of pathogens in our food supply. *E.coli* 0157:H7, *Salmonella spp.*, *Shigella spp.*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Giardia lamblia*, *Cryptosporidium parvum* and *Hepatitis A* can often be traced back to human or animal sources. Harvesting can be a labor-intensive operation involving direct human contact with fresh produce.

"Personal hygiene" includes practices that promote health and cleanliness. Good worker hygiene practices during production and harvest can help to minimize microbial contamination. Therefore, it is important to make worker health and hygiene a priority. Frequent and effective handwashing should be expected. To make this possible, toilet facilities must be clean, maintained and supplied. You will need to think about how you will address worker illness. Infected employees – those with infectious diseases or open lesions/wounds - could increase the risk of transmitting foodborne illnesses. Workers with symptoms of nausea, vomiting or diarrhea should not handle the fruits or vegetables. *Prevention practices and knowledge* are the key to the safety of the fruits and vegetables that you harvest.



Teach employees how to effectively wash their hands.

1. Wet your hands;
2. use soap, rubbing hands together for at least 20 seconds to develop a lather;
3. clean under finger nails;
4. rinse and
5. dry with a paper towel.



Teach employees to wash their hands:

- before starting to pack or process,
- after each break,
- after handling unsanitary items such as decayed produce, and
- after using the toilet facilities.

What should come first?

- *Train your workers.* Be sure to include these basic hygiene principles:
 - The relationship between hygiene, safe food handling, and foodborne illness and the role of *workers* in preventing microbial contamination of fresh fruits and vegetables-- why hygiene is important

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- The importance of proper handwashing and the use of toilet facilities
 - The importance of not working when ill

Formal (classroom) training of employees may not be practical. A one-on-one talk between the supervisor and worker may do the job. In any case, be sure to demonstrate to the worker the best way to wash hands. While a training program should fit your operation and needs, it is important that *everyone* have a working knowledge of basic good hygiene practices.

- *Develop a policy on worker illness.*
- Be familiar with the symptoms of illness such as vomiting, diarrhea, nausea and fever.
- Make sure that workers know that they need to tell a supervisor when they have symptoms of illness
- Sick employees should be reassigned to duties that do not require contact with produce.
- Check workers daily for skin lesions such as boils, blisters, and open wounds. Infection can lead to transmission of pathogens. Lesions should be bandaged and gloved. If the lesion cannot be covered, the worker should not handle produce.

What can you do?

- Be aware of any federal, state or local regulations regarding standards for worker health/hygiene.
- Provide employees with easy access to handwashing facilities or stations with potable water, soap and paper towels.
- Provide employees with easy access to toilet facilities that are cleaned, serviced, and stocked with soap, paper towels and toilet paper on a regular basis. If portable toilets are used, they must be maintained to prevent wastewater from contaminating the fields.
- If necessary, have multilingual signs in place to remind workers about hygienic practices, e.g. handwashing.
- Do not allow workers to smoke or eat in the fields-- saliva could be sprayed on the produce.
- Teach employees that uncovered sneezing or coughing may contaminate fresh produce and equipment.
- Where applicable, limit bare hand contact with fresh produce-- encourage use of gloves made of impermeable material. Latex gloves are *not* recommended because they have been associated with serious allergies.
- Encourage workers to start each day in clean clothing.
- Keep dirty boots or clothing away from harvested produce-- to prevent cross-contamination.