

## School Food Safety

Recently, a Humane Society investigation uncovered the shocking news that meat from non-ambulatory or “downer” cows had been processed and introduced into our food supply. More than 30% of the potentially tainted beef that was recalled had gone to federal food programs, including schools. While our local schools did receive some of the recalled meat, it has all been identified and destroyed and there have been no reports of illness. In the wake of this meat recall, the largest in United States history, it is extremely important that parents and students know what is being done by our schools to keep the food we serve safe.

The goal of the Greater Southern Tier BOCES Food Service Management Program is to provide nutritious and safe meals for the students and staff we serve. Because there are many ways that foods can become unsafe, each of our school districts has a fully implemented food safety plan in place and we continuously train our staff and audit our schools for compliance in this area. These safety plans are designed to reduce the risk of food borne hazards by focusing on each step of the food preparation process, from receiving deliveries through the actual meal service.

So how does food become unsafe in the first place? There are many ways this can occur. Food can be contaminated before it even arrives at the school, as was the case with the recalled beef. Food can also be contaminated by being handled improperly, such as by an ill food service worker or one who doesn't practice good hygiene. Cross contamination can occur if cooked foods come into contact with any utensil, cutting board, or surfaces that have touched contaminated raw foods. Foods that are stored, cooked, reheated, or cooled at the wrong temperature can become prime targets for bacterial growth. If these bacteria reach harmful levels, people consuming the food may become ill.

In order to prevent foods from becoming unsafe, we must take every precaution possible. Our employees must practice good personal hygiene such as following proper hand washing procedures, staying home when ill, and maintaining clean uniforms and aprons at all times. Our food service personnel use calibrated thermometers to take the temperatures of all foods. Maintaining temperature control means that we keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot. All temperatures are recorded on logs and checked to make sure that they are accurate. Even the temperature of all refrigerators and freezers are checked daily to make sure that food is being stored safely. If any foods are cooked, cooled, or stored improperly, that food is discarded. Food service equipment must be maintained, cleaned and sanitized regularly. All incoming products are checked to ensure that they were not damaged or contaminated during transport. Upon delivery, all items are inspected and dated upon arrival to ensure that food is served as fresh as possible.

There are precautions that people should take at home as well. Wash your hands before beginning meal preparation, after using the bathroom, coughing, or sneezing. Wash and sanitize counters and cutting boards after preparing raw foods such as meat or better yet, keep separate cutting boards for raw foods and fresh foods. Never use a tasting spoon in a product more than once; double dipping is not a sanitary practice. Properly freeze and refrigerate foods and discard those that are past their expiration date. Thaw foods in the refrigerator most of the time or in the microwave if they are to be cooked immediately. Do not leave foods on the counter to thaw as this promotes bacterial growth. Don't keep leftover foods around for more than 5 days. Finally, always reheat leftovers to 165° to be sure that any bacteria are killed.

By practicing safe food handling we can drastically reduce the risk of food borne infections in schools and at home. For more information on food safety, visit [www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov). These Fight BAC materials are excellent and applicable at home as well as in professional kitchens.