



Episode Four: Worker hygiene

Welcome to episode 4 of Food Safety Bites Brought to you the University of Wisconsin Madison, and funded by the USDA Food Safety Outreach Program, this is your host Harriet Behar. This episode is **worker hygiene**. In these podcast episodes, I will identify issues, and provide suggestions for how to reduce various fresh produce contamination risks and keep your customers safe. I will not talk in detail about what is required for a GAP audit or a FSMA inspection. If you want more information on those, please see the links on the website where you found these podcasts.

Produce does not grow, harvest and pack itself. People are the most important part of your operation and are essential, but also pose one of the biggest risks to food safety if they don't follow good basic hygiene. Having workers follow good hygienic practices will go a long way to preventing contamination of your produce. Providing comprehensive training and signage to follow acceptable food handling practices will remind workers to do the right thing. Humans can spread pathogens to other humans via dirty hands and careless handling practices. Produce safety is based in developing activities that reduce those risks of contamination. A refresher training on hygiene is a good idea, especially if it seems the workers are getting lax in their compliance as the season rolls on.

Basic hygiene expectations- Each person has their own level of what they might consider clean, for their bodies, hands, their clothing, shoes, gloves etc. The worker training you provide should be clear on your expectations, so that each person is approaching hygiene the same and so that they meet your protocols anytime they are working. Supervisors should make sure that there are sufficient hand wash stations, they are fully stocked with clean water, soap, paper towels etc., and that everyone knows that hands are washed when they are dirty after using the restroom, before harvesting or working in the field, and after drinking, eating or smoking.

When working with produce it is a good idea to have as few pieces of jewelry as possible, especially items that could easily fall off, or get caught in moving equipment. These include watches, rings, bracelets, which can also harbor bacteria and be hard to clean. You can use gloves to cover rings, if the worker does not want to remove them.

Workers should not eat, chew tobacco or gum or smoke in growing or packing areas, as these activities have the workers moving their hands to and from their mouths, providing a risk of contamination. Food and drinks beyond water bottles in non-glass containers should not be present in the produce wash and pack area or the fields. These should only be consumed in areas away from produce production, processing and storage areas. As discussed in another episode, workers should not handle produce when they are sick and there are also specific protocols for dealing with illness and injuries.

Long hair should be restrained to keep the hair away from the produce, as well as prevent the workers from continually touching it. Hats, bandanas, hair clips and elastic bands could be used.



Clothing- For everyone, and this includes workers as well as family members who may only periodically be present in produce areas, clothing that has been worn where it has been touched by animals or animal feces, should not be worn when handling produce. The risk of contamination of the produce is quite high in this situation. Change of clothing, work gloves and shoes between working with animals and working with produce is a commonsense solution to preventing contamination from this source. If you have working animals in the field, such as horses, having different people working with the horses than those handling the fresh produce can lessen risk. There is an episode that dives further into handling domestic animals in your fields.

Produce typically grows in dirt, out in fields where there could have been animals, birds, wind and rain. When people work in produce fields, they will get dirty from the soil, sweat, and plant debris. If the same crew will pack produce after getting muddy while harvesting, make sure that they clean up well and change clothes if needed before washing and packing produce in the packing area. Waterproof aprons that cover the torso and legs can be used to cover field dirty clothing when cleaning produce and these aprons can be then easily be cleaned after use to be ready for the next person or the time it is needed. Periodic cleaning of hands out in the field when they get really dirty, and cleaning hands before starting to wash produce in the pack house are also important to good worker hygiene.

Simple protocols like starting each day in clean clothes can reduce risk from cross contamination from dirty clothes.-We have all heard stories of workers who go an entire season without washing their Carharts! Tell your workers to launder clothes regularly and show up in clean clothes each day. Change clothes and wash hands well after handling livestock or manure and before going to harvest or wash produce. Or, organize tasks so vegetable tasks happen *before* livestock handling or are assigned to different people.

If workers are wearing aprons or reusable gloves when washing produce, these should be removed before using going into the restroom and put back on after hands are washed. If you use gloves- replace or clean them when they become contaminated like after handling trash or touching livestock. Discuss showering or bathing with your crew- pathogens can be transferred from skin or hair. If someone has been sick, or they have been caring for someone sick these are all good times to take a shower before then working with produce.

Consider your fingernails, short and well-trimmed nails hold less dirt than long ones, and long fingernails can puncture and damage the skins of produce reducing the quality and shelf life of produce as well as providing a pathway for pathogens to infiltrate the produce. When using disposable plastic gloves, replace them when torn and wash hands before you put them on. If reusable gloves, plastic or cloth, are being used- consider having replacements present in the field, so workers can get clean ones when the gloves get dirty. Reusable gloves can be washed and reused when clean.



Footwear- Pay attention to footwear as well. Tell your workers to change or wash their shoes or boots after working with animals or getting muddy in the field before they go in the packing shed. You can have dedicated rubber boots, that can be cleaned and sanitized if need be, for use in your packing shed. This investment in dedicated footwear is fairly minimal and can go a long way to preventing unwanted bacteria from coming into and colonizing your pack house floor.

Farms can be busy places, with time and people at a premium, but don't let that get in the way of paying attention to common sense protections you can do to prevent contamination.

So that's it for this episode of Food Safety Bites, the next episode is handwashing, this is your host Harriet Behar brought to you by the University of Wisconsin Madison, talk to you next time!