

04-05-13 Food Safety- A Mom Makes It Clear

A friend's son recently started a job making salads and pizza in a small restaurant a couple towns away. After being out of work for months, my friend was, of course, delighted and relieved with this opportunity. She didn't have any doubts about his ability to be a hard worker or his ability to learn. Still, just in case, in an attempt to give him an edge at the time of the interview, she gave him a few suggestions. She advised him to speak up on the topic of food safety by telling his employer how his mother was certified in food safety and that he had learned the basics by reviewing her food safety study manual.

In the excitement of hearing the good news of her son being hired, Mom was surprised to hear he was hired without an interview but she wasn't really concerned about that, and assumed the training would take place on the job or just before. There wasn't time for that then, since the interview consisted of one question: "When can you start?" Upon hearing the response of "right away", the likeable young man was hired on the spot.

When Mom first asked how the job was going, she was told all was well and that he was making pizza. Mom smiled with relief and pride. A few days later, when she next inquired, salads were being made and now, food-safety-certified-Mom couldn't help it; she had to ask about "Ready to Eat Foods" and what the restaurant's method was for ensuring No Bare Hand Contact with Ready to Eat Foods. The look of "Huh?" was concerning. Still, she hoped. Maybe they just didn't use those terms. So, she pursued the topic.

"What I mean is, when you are making salads, what do you use for placing the different items on the plate or in the bowl?" Her mind was praying, "Please don't tell me bare hands, Please don't tell me bare hands.... Please..."

Her son answers, "My hands." (Mom had to pursue it, because Moms and health agents have a lot in common; we have to know and if it isn't right, we make it right.) "But you use gloves, right?" The son seemed a little perplexed. "Gloves? No, just my bare hands."

Still, Mom had hope, because there are other acceptable methods of handling these "ready to eat foods" and Moms know that sometimes it takes a lot of questions when talking to young people. Their minds are probably on other things, such as, when will he get to the gym or who said what on facebook. So, Moms learn patience and persistence.

So, she patiently explained, with an emphasis on the importance of the topic, that ever since the Hepatitis A outbreaks in Massachusetts in 2001, this state has mandated "No Bare Hand Contact with Ready to Eat Foods". A barrier must be used between bare hands and foods such as salads, sandwiches, donuts, cookies and even ice cream, when it is being scooped with a short utensil allowing the finger tips to touch the ice cream. The barrier can be deli paper, tongs, spoons or gloves, anything preventing the bare hands from touching those foods that are ready to eat.

The young man still had that look expressing a lack of understanding this topic. So, the mother continued her explanation with the classic story of pizza versus salads, which just happened to be her son's two responsibilities. The pizza can be made with bare hands, (clean ones, of course) because the pizza has a safety measure in place before the customer eats it: it is cooked and at a high temperature, to boot! It is slid out of the oven with a pizza peel, sliced with a wheel blade and slid into a box.

The salads and sandwiches require quite a bit of handling before serving and yet there is no safety measure in place, such as cooking, before the customer eats these foods. These "Ready to Eat Foods" do not mysteriously become unsafe simply because they were not cooked. If they were kept cold and washed, if needed, and stored properly, those foods are fine. This particular circumstance of food safety revolves around the unknown, unseen potential contaminants on the hands of the food preparation people. There could be contaminants under the fingernails. There could be germs, unseen at the microbiological level, left over from bringing out the garbage or from using the bathroom. In all these cases, the food was safe but it became the vehicle for delivering the bacteria or virus right down into the consumer's stomach, where it will wreak havoc.

The hepatitis A outbreaks in 2001 resulted in clinics administering post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) with immune globulin (IG) to 1,600 people at one of those clinics. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) "estimates the cost of a single foodborne outbreak of hepatitis A involving 43 cases was approximately \$800,000. (See the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) from June 20, 2003/ 52 (24); 565-567.)

Moms have good reason to never give up hope. Son was wide-eyed as he listened to her explanation. That night she noticed that her "ServSafe"® manual was in her son's bedroom. Mom went to bed relieved and proud.

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