



Bite-Sized Food Safety



*September
2023*

**Food safety resources
for front-line managers
to train food workers**

Imagine that your restaurant will be inspected daily by anonymous persons. You will receive no notice that they are coming. They will not identify themselves as being from the Health Department. You will not receive an inspection report. However, the observations made by these persons will be shared with the public via social media and other means. You will have no right to appeal their observations. However, you will be subject to financial penalties based on what they observe and report to the public. Actually, this is already happening every day. The persons performing these inspections are your customers and they are not shy about telling friends and neighbors about what they have observed.

Complaints! Complaints! Complaints!

Each year the Health Department receives numerous complaints about restaurant food safety and sanitation. Each complaint is then investigated by a Sanitarian from the Health Department.

Some complaints (13%) turn out to be false accusations made by a disgruntled customer or employee. For example, the complaint may allege that the walk-in refrigerator does not work. However, inspection shows the refrigerator to be working.

Some complaints (50%) can't be validated as true or false as they are about actions that one would have had to be there at a specific time to observe. For example, a complaint alleges that an employee was picking their nose while preparing food. In these cases, the Health Department talks with restaurant management about the complaint, but takes no action as the complaint is not confirmed.

Some complaints (37%) prove to be accurate. For example, a complaint alleges that a restaurant is overrun with cockroaches and an inspection by the Health Department reveals that to be true. In these cases, the Health Department will take appropriate action to eliminate food safety risks and assure that the problem is corrected.

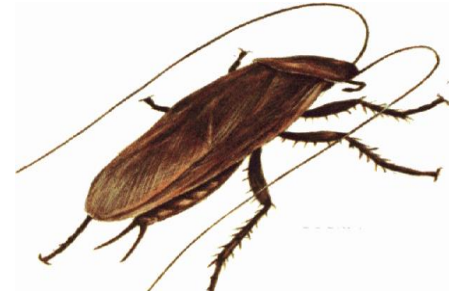


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What Do People Commonly Complain About?

The Health Department analyzed the complaints about restaurants they have received over the last several years. The data revealed what people most commonly complained about was insects – cockroaches and flies. Keeping doors closed, trash cans covered, and kitchen and dining areas clean are the most effective measures a restaurant can take to control these vermin. Regular visits by a pest control professional will also help.

Nature of Complaint	Number
Insect infestation – roaches or flies	21
Hygienic practices of employees *	18
Poor food safety practices	17
Alleged foodborne illness	14
Food in poor condition	13
Plumbing issue	13
Handwashing / bare hand contact w/ RTE foods / glove use	12
Cleanliness of dining / food service area	11
Facility condition / repair	9



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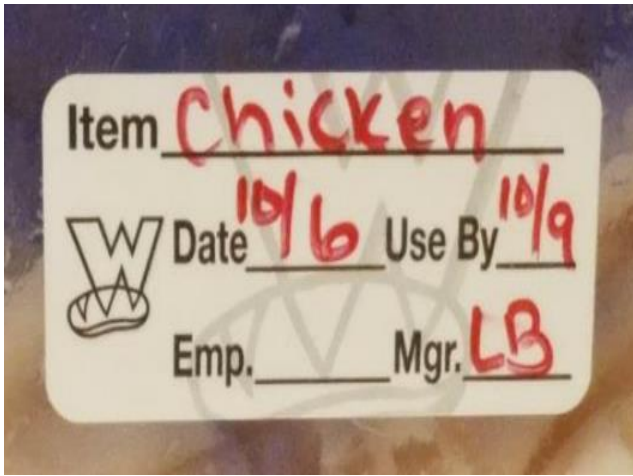
The second most common thing customers complained about was the hygienic practices of employees. Customers are keenly aware of what the persons handling their food are doing. Some examples of complaints the Health Department received about poor hygienic practices are listed below.

Examples of Poor Employee Hygienic Practices
Bartender serving food/drinks while smoking
Employee picking their nose
Employee blowing on food
Employee without proper hair restraint
Employee wiping nose with back of gloved hand
Employee eating while preparing food
Employee playing with kitten outside then going inside and preparing food without washing hands
Employee with dirty clothing
Employee with wet towel around their neck



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The third most common complaint received about restaurants was regarding their food safety practices. Customers and employees pay a lot of attention to how food is stored and prepared. There were complaints about date marking, cross contamination, proper food storage, food temperature control, reuse of single-use articles, and dish washing procedures. There were also complaints about how equipment is handled and cleaned. Some examples of complaints about poor food safety practices are listed on the next page.



<u>Examples of Poor Food Safety Practices</u>
Soap / sanitizer not being used to wash dishes
Cross contamination in food prep area
Reuse of single-use bags
Food stored on floor
Food stored uncovered
No / improper date marking
TCS foods left out at room temperature
Food that was dropped on floor served to customer
Ice scoop stored with handle in ice
Reserving food returned by a customer

There were 14 complaints received about possible foodborne illness. The Health Department takes these complaints very seriously. They are normally investigated within 24 hours.

People often assume that they became ill from food from the last place they ate. However, some germs take several days to make people sick. For this reason, the Health Department asks persons complaining of foodborne illness to tell about all the foods they ate in the last three days. Sometimes, the food that made them sick was actually prepared in their home.



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<u>Examples of Food in Poor Condition</u>
Curdled milk
Food product was moldy
Hamburger / chicken was raw
Chicken smelled bad
Meat was sold beyond its "Sell By" date
Cooked food was served cold
Food tasted sour

Some complaints were about foods purchased in a grocery store that were spoiled, moldy, or which smelled bad. Other complaints were about products sold beyond their expiration or "Sell By" date.

There were also complaints about restaurants that served foods that were raw or undercooked, which were served cold, or which tasted bad.

There were 13 complaints about various plumbing issues – toilets overflowing, drains backing up, sinks with no hot water, leaky pipes, etc. In some cases, restaurants had to close until these problems could be resolved.



When a temporary closure of a food establishment is necessary to protect public health, the Health Department works closely with the establishment owner to get the facility reopened as soon as possible.



There were also 12 complaints about food employees not washing their hands, not using gloves or a utensil to handle ready-to-eat foods, or reusing single-use gloves.

Norovirus, Shigella, E. coli, Salmonella, and Hepatitis A are some of the most common foodborne illnesses. Together they account for more than 75% of all foodborne illnesses. Much of this illness could be prevented if food employees practiced better handwashing and refrained from handling ready-to-eat foods with their bare hands.

Wash Your Hands - Use Gloves

Eleven persons complained about the cleanliness of dining/food service areas. Six persons complained about the cleanliness of kitchens. Five persons complained about dirty restrooms.

There is nothing that turns off customers faster than a restaurant that is dirty. They assume that if the areas they can see are dirty, so is everything they can't see. One experience in a dirty restaurant is often all it takes to convince the customer to never come back.



If a food establishment is in poor condition, it is often a sign the place is in financial trouble and is delaying needed repairs. It affects the comfort of both patrons and employees. Nobody wants to eat or work in a place that looks like a dump.

<u>Examples of Facility in Poor Condition / Repair</u>
No heat
No air conditioning
Leaky roof
Clogged / dirty ceiling vents
Peeling / chipping paint
Mold on walls
Exposed insulation



Six persons complained about rodents – rats or mice – in food establishments. Keeping doors closed and sealing up possible entry points for rodents under doors or through exterior walls is important. Remember that a mouse can squeeze through a hole as small in diameter as a dime. Besides scaring patrons, rodents can contaminate and destroy thousands of dollars worth of food products in a relatively short period of time.

<u>Nature of Complaint</u>	<u>Number</u>
Kitchen cleanliness	6
Rodent infestation – rats or mice	6
Foreign object in food – bandaid, metal, false fingernail, insect parts, hard object	6
Dirty restrooms	5
Food equipment condition / maintenance	3
Ill employee	2
Food safety credentials	2
Animals on premises	1

The Health Department also received complaints about various foreign objects – metal, a false fingernail, a Bandaid, a hard object, insect parts – that were found in a customer’s food.

They also received complaints about ill employees and employees that did not have credentials showing that they had been trained in food safety.

CLOSING THOUGHT: Complaints from customers are often an early warning that there are problems in a food establishment. Remember that only about 10% of unhappy customers bother to tell the restaurant management. Instead, they tell all their friends and ruin your reputation. Paying close attention to customer complaints helps protect your business and may prevent an outbreak of foodborne illness. So, take every complaint seriously. It may be the tip of the iceberg.