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Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality

FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Personal Hygiene & Fitness to Work in Care Catering

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 082

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Introduction

Understanding Personal Hygiene & Fitness to Work in Care Catering

Good personal hygiene is a fundamental part of food safety. People working with food can unintentionally introduce harmful bacteria, viruses, allergens, physical contaminants or other hazards if appropriate hygiene practices are not followed.

This is particularly important in **care catering**, where meals are often prepared for older people or individuals who may be more vulnerable to the effects of foodborne illness.

Why Personal Hygiene Matters

Food handlers have an important responsibility to protect food from contamination throughout preparation, cooking and service.

Good personal hygiene includes:

- Washing and drying hands effectively at appropriate times
- Wearing clean and suitable protective clothing
- Keeping hair appropriately restrained
- Keeping fingernails clean and suitably maintained
- Covering cuts and wounds appropriately
- Avoiding behaviours that could contaminate food
- Reporting relevant illnesses and symptoms promptly
- Following workplace food hygiene and infection-control procedures

Personal hygiene is not simply about appearing clean. It is about **preventing contamination and protecting the people who will eat the food**.

What Does “Fitness to Work” Mean?

In food safety, **fitness to work** means considering whether a person's health could create a risk of contaminating food.

Food handlers should report relevant symptoms or illnesses to their manager or supervisor in accordance with workplace procedures.

These may include:

- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Certain diagnosed infections
- Infected wounds, sores or skin conditions
- Other symptoms or conditions that could present a food-safety risk

Staff should **not make their own decision to conceal symptoms or continue food-handling duties when illness could present a risk.**

The manager or responsible person should follow the organisation's food-safety procedures and current public-health guidance when deciding whether the employee can safely undertake food-handling duties.

The 48-Hour Rule

Food handlers who have experienced **diarrhoea and/or vomiting** should normally be excluded from food-handling duties and should not return to food handling until they have been symptom-free for **at least 48 hours.**

Some infections may require a longer exclusion period or additional advice before returning to food-handling duties.

Staff should therefore:

REPORT → FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS → RETURN ONLY WHEN SAFE

Never hide symptoms because of concerns about staffing levels or workload. Protecting residents and preventing the spread of illness must take priority.

Key Principle

Clean hands, good personal hygiene and prompt reporting of illness are essential controls in preventing food contamination and protecting vulnerable people.

Personal Hygiene Standards for Food Handlers

Good personal hygiene should be maintained throughout every shift. Catering staff should follow their organisation's food-safety procedures and take appropriate action whenever there is a risk that food could become contaminated.

Effective Hand Hygiene

Hands can transfer harmful microorganisms and other contaminants to food, equipment and food-contact surfaces.

Food handlers should wash their hands thoroughly at appropriate times, including:

- Before starting food preparation
- Before handling ready-to-eat food
- After using the toilet
- After handling raw food
- After touching waste or bins
- After cleaning tasks
- After coughing, sneezing or blowing the nose
- After touching the face or hair
- After handling potentially contaminated items
- Whenever hands may have become contaminated

Hands should be washed using an appropriate handwashing facility, soap and effective drying method in accordance with workplace procedures.

Disposable gloves do not replace effective handwashing.

Protective Clothing

Clean, suitable protective clothing helps reduce the risk of contamination.

Depending on the workplace and duties, this may include:

- Clean chef jackets or uniforms
- Aprons
- Suitable head coverings or hair restraints
- Appropriate non-slip footwear
- Additional protective clothing required for specific tasks

Protective clothing should be changed when it becomes excessively soiled or contaminated and should be stored and managed in accordance with workplace procedures.

Hair, Nails and Jewellery

Good practice includes:

- Keeping hair clean and appropriately restrained
- Keeping fingernails clean and suitably maintained
- Avoiding false nails or nail products where prohibited by workplace policy
- Following workplace rules regarding jewellery and watches
- Avoiding touching the face, hair or other areas unnecessarily while handling food

Local workplace policies should always be followed.

Cuts, Wounds and Skin Conditions

Cuts and wounds can present a contamination risk.

Food handlers should:

- Report infected wounds, sores or relevant skin conditions
- Keep cuts and wounds appropriately covered
- Use suitable waterproof dressings where required
- Replace dressings if they become loose, damaged or contaminated
- Follow workplace procedures regarding additional protection, such as gloves

Food businesses commonly use **highly visible waterproof dressings**, such as blue dressings, so they can be more easily identified if accidentally lost.

Avoiding Contamination During Food Preparation

Food handlers should avoid behaviours that could contaminate food, including:

- Coughing or sneezing over food
- Eating while preparing food
- Touching the face or hair unnecessarily
- Using unsuitable personal items in food-preparation areas
- Handling food after touching potentially contaminated surfaces without washing hands
- Wearing dirty or contaminated protective clothing

Key Principle

Personal hygiene must be maintained throughout the working day—not only when the shift begins.

Managing Illness, Contamination Risks & Safe Working Practices

Personal hygiene and fitness to work require ongoing attention throughout the working day. Staff and managers should respond promptly when illness, contamination or poor hygiene could affect food safety.

Reporting Illness Promptly

Food handlers should tell their manager or supervisor as soon as possible if they experience symptoms or are diagnosed with an illness that could present a food-safety risk.

Staff should:

- Report vomiting or diarrhoea promptly
- Report relevant diagnosed infections
- Report infected wounds, sores or skin conditions
- Follow instructions about exclusion from food-handling duties
- Provide relevant information requested under workplace procedures
- Seek appropriate medical advice when required
- Follow any instructions given before returning to food handling

Staff should never conceal relevant symptoms simply because the kitchen is busy or short-staffed.

Preventing Cross-Contamination from People

Food can become contaminated indirectly through hands, clothing, equipment and frequently touched surfaces.

Good practice includes:

- Washing hands between different tasks
- Keeping clean and dirty activities appropriately separated
- Changing contaminated protective clothing where necessary
- Cleaning and disinfecting food-contact surfaces according to workplace procedures
- Avoiding unnecessary hand contact with ready-to-eat food
- Using utensils or other appropriate methods where practical
- Keeping personal belongings away from food-preparation and storage areas

Gloves and Hand Hygiene

Disposable gloves may be appropriate for certain tasks, but they can themselves become contaminated.

When gloves are used:

- Hands should be clean before putting them on
- Gloves should be suitable for the task
- They should be changed between incompatible tasks
- Damaged or contaminated gloves should be replaced
- Used gloves should be disposed of appropriately
- Hands should be washed when required after removing them

Wearing gloves does not make unsafe food-handling practices safe and does not replace effective handwashing.

Visitors, Contractors & Other People in the Kitchen

Personal hygiene controls should not apply only to catering staff.

Visitors, maintenance workers, delivery personnel and other people entering food-preparation areas should follow appropriate site hygiene requirements.

Depending on the circumstances, this may include:

- Wearing suitable protective clothing
- Following hand-hygiene requirements
- Remaining within authorised areas
- Avoiding unnecessary contact with food or food-contact surfaces
- Following instructions given by catering staff or management

If a Hygiene Problem Occurs

If food may have been contaminated because of illness or poor personal hygiene:

STOP → PROTECT → REPORT → ASSESS → CORRECT → RECORD

Staff should:

1. **Stop** the affected activity where necessary.
2. **Protect** or separate potentially affected food.
3. **Report** the concern to the responsible person.
4. **Assess** the food and surrounding area according to workplace procedures.
5. **Correct** the problem, which may include safely disposing of food, changing protective clothing, handwashing, cleaning and disinfection.
6. **Record** the incident or corrective action where required.

Food should **not be served if its safety is in doubt**.

Key Principle

Prompt reporting and corrective action help prevent a personal hygiene issue from becoming a food-safety incident.

Summary, Staff Checklist & Further Information

Good personal hygiene and appropriate fitness-to-work procedures are essential parts of food safety. In care catering, these controls are particularly important because food may be prepared for people who are more vulnerable to serious illness.

Every member of the catering team has a responsibility to follow good hygiene practices, report relevant illness promptly and take action whenever food safety may have been compromised.

Summary

Catering staff should remember to:

- Maintain good personal hygiene throughout every shift
- Wash and dry hands effectively at appropriate times
- Wear clean and suitable protective clothing
- Keep hair appropriately restrained
- Follow workplace requirements for nails, jewellery and personal items
- Cover cuts and wounds appropriately
- Report vomiting, diarrhoea and other relevant illnesses or symptoms promptly
- Follow exclusion and return-to-work instructions
- Prevent contamination between different tasks
- Remember that disposable gloves do not replace handwashing
- Report hygiene or contamination concerns immediately
- Never serve food when its safety is in doubt

Personal Hygiene & Fitness-to-Work Checklist

Before and during food-handling duties, ask:

- ☐ Are my hands clean and have I washed them when required?
- ☐ Is my protective clothing clean and suitable for the task?
- ☐ Is my hair appropriately restrained?
- ☐ Are any cuts or wounds appropriately covered?
- ☐ Am I following workplace requirements regarding jewellery, nails and personal items?
- ☐ Have I reported any illness or symptoms that could affect food safety?
- ☐ Have I changed gloves or washed my hands between tasks where required?
- ☐ Am I protecting ready-to-eat food from contamination?
- ☐ Have I reported any hygiene problem or contamination concern?
- ☐ If food safety is uncertain, have I stopped and asked the responsible person before serving it?

Further Information

For further guidance on personal hygiene and fitness to work in food businesses, refer to current information from:

Food Standards Agency (FSA)

Food hygiene guidance for businesses:

<https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/food-hygiene-for-your-business>

Food Standards Agency (FSA)

Fitness to work guidance for food handlers and businesses:

<https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/fitness-to-work>

Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business (SFBB)

<https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/safer-food-better-business-sfbb>

Staff should also follow their employer's food-safety management system, infection-control procedures and local reporting arrangements.

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

- Resource 023 – Hand Hygiene Best Practice Checklist
- Resource 032 – Preventing Cross-Contamination in Care Catering
- Resource 073 – Food Safety for Vulnerable People in Care Settings
- Resource 074 – Preventing Foodborne Illness in Care Catering
- Resource 075 – Kitchen Cleaning & Disinfection in Care Catering

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- Food Safety & Hygiene Level 2
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