

Chapter 14 – What to do if an Outbreak Occurs

If a foodborne disease outbreak occur in a food establishment, the impact on the business and its victims can be enormous. This section pertains to what to do if a foodborne disease outbreak strikes your business.

WHEN TO SUSPECT AN OUTBREAK

From time to time, a food establishment may receive a call from customers who claim that they and/or others ate food at the restaurant or had drinks or consumed food manufactured by a food processor and became sick.

All calls (or visits) should be considered legitimate. Employees should direct all such calls to the manager or person in charge immediately.

It is extremely important that the following information be obtained from the caller:

1. Name, address and telephone number of person calling;
2. Who became ill and what were their symptoms;
3. Was the illness diagnosed by a physician (get physician's name if diagnosed);
4. What foods and/or drinks were consumed;
5. What was the day and time the food was consumed;
6. Who was the waitress, bartender or person who served or provided the food, if any; and
7. Other information that may seem important at the time.

Write the information down. Include the date and time the person called. Inform the caller that the complaint will be investigated immediately, and that the management will call back within a specified timeframe.

The information needs to be promptly evaluated and a decision made on the likelihood that an outbreak has occurred. There are no clear-cut guidelines. The best rule of thumb is to **consider that a foodborne disease outbreak may have occurred when two or more persons experience a similar illness, usually gastrointestinal, after eating a common food.**

After giving the matter proper consideration and the management has reason to believe that a foodborne disease outbreak **may** have occurred, the following contacts are important:

Health District. Contact your local health district immediately. In many instances, the customer will also contact the local health district. It benefits your food establishment to contact the health district also.

Your Attorney. Advise your attorney of the situation and the action taken. Although your attorney will most likely recommend that you cooperate fully with the health district, he or she may want to be included in the investigation to ensure that the rights of all concerned are properly respected.

Your Insurance Agent. Depending on the nature and the extent of the outbreak, your insurance company may become involved. It is advisable to inform your agent at the beginning of an official investigation.

FOODBORNE DISEASE OUTBREAK INVESTIGATION

Once an official foodborne disease outbreak investigation has begun, the management needs to be aware of the following health district activities:

Interviews. Investigating a foodborne disease outbreak is a lot like detective work. Health district staff will be asking a lot of questions, not only of food establishment employees, but also of people who allegedly have become ill. Two fundamental questions need to be answered:

- What food caused the illness; and
- What went wrong to cause the illness.

Healthy individuals who ate at the same time might also be interviewed. This will help to identify what foods might have caused the illness.

Isolating the Disease. Depending on the nature of the foodborne disease outbreak, preventing additional cases is paramount. Such control measures that may need to be implemented immediately are as follows:

- Excluding sick employees from food-contact work;
- Using alternate food processing or preparation methods; and/or
- Closing the establishment.

The *Idaho Food Code* Section 2-201.12 requires that you **exclude** any food worker diagnosed with any of the following diseases:

- Hepatitis A
- Shiga toxin producing *E. coli*
- Shigellosis
- Salmonellosis

Exclusion means that the employee cannot work in the food establishment. In addition, the *Idaho Food Code* requires that an employee who is jaundiced (yellowish coloring of skin and/or eyes) be excluded.

It is also required that you **restrict** employees from having any direct contact with food if they are experiencing any of the following symptoms:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Sore throat with fever
- Open wounds on the hands or arms

A restriction means that the person can work, but must not be allowed to have direct contact with the food, clean equipment, utensils, linens, and unwrapped single-service items.

These restrictions and exclusions are extremely important because a person experiencing these symptoms or diseases can easily transmit pathogenic bacteria in food.

Sampling. Collecting food and environmental samples is an important activity during a foodborne disease outbreak investigation. Finding or not finding the suspected organism or agent in a specific food is significant in determining the cause of the outbreak. Also, it is not uncommon to obtain stool, vomitus and/or blood samples from victims and employees.

Embargo. Suspected foods in foodborne disease outbreak investigations may be placed under embargo until a determination can be made as to its safety or status. Such foods will be properly identified, and the **food must remain undisturbed until the embargo is lifted.**

Reports. Several reports are generated as a result of the investigation. A special inspection report is generally completed during the course of the investigation. It is similar to a regular inspection but only addresses conditions relating to the outbreak. Also, case investigation reports are generated.

CONSEQUENCE OF THE INVESTIGATION

Health laws and regulations require certain investigations and reporting of foodborne disease outbreaks. The consequence of an investigation is as follows:

- **Determines if a foodborne disease outbreak did occur.** Many complaints to the health agencies about possible illness from food consumed at a food establishment are the result of another cause. Also, occasionally the health agency determines that an actual outbreak was not associated with the food establishment;
- **Identifies the factors associated with the outbreak.** The investigation attempts to identify the food that caused the outbreak, why it caused the outbreak, the number of cases associated with the outbreak and other factors. This information contributes to better understanding the outbreak. Also, reports generated from an investigation are submitted to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare for state and national statistical purposes; and
- **Provides for assisting the food establishment in preventing future outbreaks.** The primary purpose of the investigation is to prevent further illness. With the information obtained from the investigation, the health agency can work with the food establishment in putting additional emphasis on specific food safety and sanitation practices to prevent future outbreaks.