

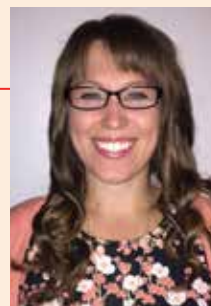
Getting Back to Business

Tips for Serving Patrons Safely in a COVID-19 Environment

While many restaurants and foodservice operations were forced to close last spring due to the global pandemic, healthcare operations needed to quickly adapt in order to continue serving their patrons—the patients and residents—who depend on them most.

Increasing their relentless focus on sanitation and safety, healthcare foodservice teams have had to reevaluate their cleaning and disinfection efforts in the era of COVID-19. Whether it's preparing food back of house, serving meals to patients and residents, or feeding employees and guests in cafeteria settings, the challenges of operating in this complex and evolving environment include safely serving bulk food items, ongoing training, and the need to meet a variety of needs and concerns as more potential visitors return.

“Right now, foodservice operations need to focus on the health and safety of patients, visitors, and staff alike, which is a tall, but doable, order,” said Megan Kelbel, a marketing manager for General Mills Convenience & Foodservice who works closely with non-commercial operations. “The right combination of protocols, training, and communication can make a tremendous difference in how safe and welcoming your environment is for everyone.”



Becca Picha is a marketing manager for General Mills Convenience & Foodservice who works closely with non-commercial operations to identify the products and solutions to help them succeed.

For more information and additional guidance to serve patrons safely, please visit <https://www.generalmillscf.com/industries/healthcare>.

General Mills Foodservice recently partnered with Ecolab, a global leader in water, hygiene, and infection-prevention solutions, to provide guidance for foodservice operations as they navigate the ongoing pandemic, implement enhanced cleaning procedures, and increase communication about sanitation practices among staff and patrons.

“Public health recommendations focus on standard infection control practices, enhanced training, and compliance: Both personal hygiene and environmental hygiene are critical to safety,” said Ruth Petran, PhD, CFS, a senior corporate scientist at Ecolab and a food safety and public health expert with more than 30 years of industry experience. “This consists of excluding ill personnel, frequent hand-washing, minimizing close contact with others, and proper use of face coverings when appropriate, as well as regularly cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and high-touch objects with approved disinfectants.”

Following are tips for safely resuming or updating operations with a stringent focus to help make solutions as safe and clean as possible.

START WITH YOUR STAFF

An informed, healthy, and confident staff is essential to providing high-quality food service to others in the healthcare setting. Fortunately, you can achieve this by emphasizing staff training and organizational updates.

First, determine if you have an adequate number of trained employees to staff each area of operation during your normal business hours, and develop a business continuity plan to prevent staff burnout and customer confusion. Then, consider the following steps for staff safety:

- Educate all employees on COVID-19 symptoms and how to closely monitor health. Any symptomatic or exposed employee should remain home in accordance with your company illness policy.

- Reinforce personal hygiene, cough etiquette, and social distancing as recommended by both local and federal public health authorities.
- Provide hand soap and sanitizer, tissues, face masks, and other safety items. Ensure staff members are comfortable donning and removing gloves.
- Create a schedule so employees are disinfecting all personal hard, non-porous surfaces according to product directions.
- Develop policies for worker protection and offer training on product use, reading Safety Data Sheets (SDS) and cleaning schedules for staff.

“It is important that every employee is aware of and comfortable implementing safety and sanitation protocol,” said Kelbel. “Safeguarding your employees shows that you care about their well-being and that, in turn, creating a hygienic atmosphere for all is a priority for your healthcare foodservice organization.”

TAKE CLEANING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

“Cleaning has always been a critical component of healthcare foodservice operations, but it goes without saying that it is even more crucial while operating during a pandemic to protect public health,” said Petran.

If possible, operations should consider dedicating a shift to extensive cleaning and disinfection for safety of both employees and guests. Likewise, operations should increase cleaning frequency as foot traffic, soil load, and/or infection risk grow.

The “5 Factors of Clean” can provide a great launching point for evaluating your current and projected sanitation efforts: 1) Time; 2) Temperature; 3) Chemical Action; 4) Mechanical Action; 5) Overall Procedure.

When it comes to public spaces such as dining rooms and cafeterias, your organization will

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CONTINUUM OF OPTIONS FOR SERVING BULK PRODUCTS

SANITIZED SELF-SERVE

Consumers serve their own product

- Cereal dispensers
- Parfait bars
- Baked good trays

STAFF SERVED

Staff member serves consumers

- Cereal dispensers
- Made-to-order parfaits or sandwiches
- Baked goods

PRE-PORTIONED BACK OF HOUSE

Staff member pre-ports or makes product back of house

- Portioned bulk cereal
- Parfaits and smoothies
- Sandwiches
- Baked goods

SINGLE SERVE

Staff member pre-ports or makes product back of house

- Cup, bowl pack, or single pack cereal
- Cup yogurt
- Individually-wrapped baked goods

Perceived Risk

Cost

want to have multi-purpose disinfectant, glass cleaner, food contact sanitizer, and manual detergent close at hand. Best practices include:

- Disinfect high-touch, non-food contact surfaces frequently.
- Train staff on proper hand hygiene, use of face coverings, and procedures for cleaning and disinfecting food contact vs. non-food contact surfaces.
- Minimize items offered on tables and disinfect any that remain (menus, condiments) between customers.
- Encourage distancing by spreading out tables.
- Consider adding or expanding take-out and in-room dining options.

For safe back-of-house operations, your cleaning repertoire is also paramount and should include: multi-purpose disinfectant, hand soap and sanitizer, food contact sanitizer, manual detergent, and machine detergent. Best practices, again, center around disinfection of high-touch surfaces, ample handwashing and hand-sanitizing stations, as well as training, distancing, eliminating standing water, and removing food debris and spilled garbage to prevent pest activity.

For both areas, employees should ensure that treated surfaces remain wet for the

amount of time indicated on the product label. Rather than disinfecting and rinsing immediately, give your sanitation products the time they need to be most effective.

Finally, when possible, offer contactless interactions to prevent spread of disease and to let your team and visitors know that you take their health seriously.

BULKING UP

While some organizations have removed all bulk self-serve products—from cereal to yogurt bars and from sandwiches and baked goods—this may not be an ideal long-term solution. Cereal, for example, is the number one item consumers choose to eat at breakfast¹, and it appeals to a wide swath of consumers. Likewise, bulk yogurt delivers on taste, health, and convenience and also appeals throughout the day. Fountain drinks, fresh fruit, and ice cream are also customer favorites that may be impacted by changed service strategies.

“Bulk products can help organizations keep costs down and allow for product variety as well as customization,” said Kelbel. “Depending on the popularity of bulk items in your organization, it may be better to find solutions for serving bulk products in a safe and clean manner.”

REFERENCE

1. Foodservice Away-From-Home Bakery Products Category Update and Outlook for the US Foodservice Marketplace, May 2019.

Four options for serving these items safely include:

- Sanitized self-service area where consumers help themselves
- Staff member(s) serving consumers
- Pre-portioned menu items
- Single-serve or individually-wrapped items

When determining the best option for your operation, consider guidance from your local government, the comfort level of your consumers, available labor, and cost implications.

Safety tips for any bulk self-service area include:

- Provide hand sanitizer both before and after service.
- Display signage that directs consumers' actions and highlights cleaning procedures.
- Minimize guest handling of utensils and dishes.
- Protect food behind sneeze guards and provide other physical barriers, such as bakery paper, for guest use.
- Encourage physical distancing.

Staff can also disinfect dispenser handles or replace serving utensils after each use and schedule frequent disinfection of high-touch areas.

If staff members are supporting self-service, it's smart to set the service area up six feet from consumers. Floor graphics are great for reminding customers to keep their distance. Staff members should wear gloves and masks when facing patients and visitors and also when pre-portioning products in the back of the house.

Although surfaces are not thought to be the main way COVID-19 spreads, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) continues to recommend frequent cleaning, sanitation, and disinfection of all high-touch areas.

Petran adds, "A comprehensive cleaning and sanitizing or disinfecting program will give broad public health protection."

COMMUNICATION ABOUT CLEANING

Communication is one of the keys to making your guests feel comfortable dining in your healthcare foodservice operation. You cannot overcommunicate when it comes to health matters.

This starts with clear signage about your safety procedures as well as how to move through your operation. It should also include signage on expectations for guest behavior. You can create a script for your employees to share and to help them answer common guest questions.

In addition, update your website, social media, and marketing materials to share your stepped-up cleaning and disinfection protocols. Providing multiple avenues for customer or guest feedback is a great way to keep a pulse on how your enhanced protocols are received and how you can improve.

MAINTAINING THE HEALTH IN HEALTH CARE

Granted, operating a healthcare foodservice operation can be challenging in the best of times—varying diets, staffing and training issues, long service hours, and more—but it's especially demanding now.

"The more you focus on getting it right the first time, show that you care about everyone's health and wellness, and deliver the training and expectations your team needs to succeed, the more you will create a welcoming atmosphere and a safe, clean experience for everyone who walks through your doors," added Kelbel. ■

ANFP and NFEF

Annual Reports Available

The Association of Nutrition & Foodservice Professionals and Nutrition & Foodservice Education Foundation have released Annual Reports for fiscal year 2020 (June 1, 2019 - May 31, 2020).

Take an in-depth look at www.ANFPonline.org/news.

