

# FOOD SAFETY SENTINEL

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## STAFF TRAINING – WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Food plant employees must be properly trained to ensure that food and production processes are safe. It is a government requirement. A food safety program is only as good as its employee training program. Staff training can be a challenge in many food-processing plants, especially in Alberta where the food industry faces staff shortages and high employee turnover.

Some of the benefits to having an effective employee-training program:

- Promotes food safety and quality of your products;
- Helps prevent mistakes, which could lead to money savings through: reduced waste and re-work, reduced downtime spent to fix the problems and re-train employees, and avoiding recalls;
- Meets government regulations. Meat Facility Standards requires that a plant ensure its employees receive general food-hygiene training.

### Types of Training

**Food Safety and Hygiene Training** pertains to food hygiene practices including personal hygiene and food-handling skills. Employees should receive this training at the beginning of their employment and it should be reinforced at least every year.

The following resources may be used:

- Employee health and hygiene policy in the form of a handout or handbook. If a handbook or a brochure is used, other information on payroll, disciplinary policies (lateness, absenteeism) and employee safety may be included.
- Hygiene training videos. Many of these can be purchased or rented from professional organizations. The food safety specialists with Agriculture and Rural Development have materials and videos available.

A plant-specific employee health and hygiene policy is very important for any successful food safety system. The hygiene policy outlines a company's food safety responsibilities.

Such a policy should cover:

- **Hand washing** – All food handlers must be made aware of the importance of frequent and proper hand-washing practices to reduce the transmission of germs and bacteria. Everyone is responsible for washing their hands upon entering production areas, after using toilets and every time hands become contaminated during processing. Post the health and hygiene policy in an easily visible place (e.g., staff notice board) where all employees and visitors cannot help but see it.
- **Protective clothing** (smocks, footwear, gloves etc) – All food handlers need to understand the importance of wearing clean, protective clothing while working with food. Plant clothing and hair coverings must be worn in production areas.



### Tips to Ensure Effective Training

- Training should be appropriate to the process and to the assigned tasks. Staff should be trained in the methods that are relevant to their job; give employees information that concerns only their duties.
- Make the training personal. Show rather than tell employees how to wear the uniform, where to store belongings, and how to properly wash their hands. Try to relate the training to the employee's life or experience (for example, when explaining foodborne illnesses, ask them if they or their families have experienced this before). Allow employees to share ideas during training. Ask new employees to demonstrate the procedures to show they understand.
- Write training materials in plain language. Respect the employee's comprehension ability and write to this level, using precise words and clear structure.
- People learn in different ways. How they learn may change as they get older. No matter what their age, approach staff with respect and flexibility. Different teaching styles (lectures, written procedures, showing employees how to perform tasks) should be used to ensure that employees retain as much information as possible.
- Always acknowledge employees' knowledge and experience. Draw on that experience during the training, and remember that training is often just one of many things busy adult learners have to deal with.
- Training food-processing employees whose English is limited is a challenge. If you have several employees who share a language other than English, it may be useful to translate food safety policies and training material into that language. A picture can be worth a thousand words, so use graphics to depict hand-washing and other practices. Display posters and images throughout the facility to illustrate food safety and hygiene policies. Use images and references from your employees' culture where appropriate.

### Documenting Training

Document training to prove that training has been conducted. A training record or file is also a simple way to monitor whether employees receive training in all appropriate areas, and helps ensure that training is updated at least once every year.

A training record should document the following:

- Who is giving and receiving the training;
- A description of the type of training;
- Materials used for training or how the training is done (name of procedure used, hands-on training, etc.);
- Date of training;
- Comments about unusual situations; and
- Employee signatures to demonstrate that they have received the training and understand the information.

## FUNDING AVAILABLE TO IMPROVE FOOD SAFETY PRACTICES

Funding is still available for you to improve your food safety practices or implement the Meat Facilities Standards or HACCP. Even small changes may be eligible for funding. You may qualify for up to \$20,000.

We are ready to assist you!

Getting started is easier than you think.

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780-427-4054, toll free 310-0000

Funding is available through the Agricultural Policy Framework, Food Safety Initiative (APF/FSI) – a Federal, Provincial, Territorial Initiative.

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## DEVELOPING A TRAINING PROGRAM

Food plant workers may not have to attend a formalized course if a company has a well-designed training program. This can be accomplished by any combination of the following:

- In-house training by experienced and skilled staff or management;
- Providing staff with food safety and food hygiene information to read;
- Hiring a consultant to run an in-house-hygiene training course.

Choose the method that best suits your process and staff. Be sure that your staff have the skills and knowledge they need to do their work.

In developing your training program, ask yourself these questions:

- What are the food handling and safety risks associated with the process?
- What food-handling tasks do employees perform?
- Have staff been told or shown how to handle food safely within the facility?
- Is someone responsible for ensuring procedures or policies are followed?
- Do staff have the equipment and space necessary to meet the food safety and hygiene policies?

Smocks, aprons and footwear must be changed if soiled during a work shift, or before the employee changes work areas (e.g., moving from handling raw product to handling cooked product). Employees should also be informed where and when to remove their work clothing (e.g. outside the facility, inside washrooms, or while smoking or eating).

- **Personal cleanliness and behaviour** – Anyone working in direct contact with food, food-contact surfaces and food-packaging materials must follow proper hygienic behavior on the job. This includes:
  - No eating, drinking or smoking within facilities except in permitted staff areas;
  - Storing personal items away from food storage and preparation areas;
  - Tying back and covering hair at all times;
  - Keeping nails short and clean and not using nail polish or artificial nails;
  - Completely covering cuts or wounds with a waterproof bandage and gloves (in case the bandage comes off) to prevent contamination;
  - Where possible, preventing people with cuts or wounds from handling food (open cuts and sores may contain germs and or bacteria);
  - Avoiding wearing jewelry in areas where food is stored or prepared;
  - Controlling employee traffic to prevent bacteria and allergen transfer between areas.
- **Illness and Injuries** – A health and hygiene policy and related training should prevent the transfer of communicable diseases from known sources of contamination. Food handlers should also be trained on what to do if they become ill. In the event an employee is cut or injured on the job, the hygiene policy should outline procedures for cleaning and sanitizing surfaces and equipment, and for the isolation and disposal of products contaminated with human blood. (For more information on this item, please refer to the April 2008 issue of the Food Safety Sentinel.)

**Technical Training** is a specific “how-to-do-the-job” training that should be combined with food safety training. It involves providing the employee with the information and skills needed to complete specific tasks, such as monitoring manufacturing control points, sanitation, maintenance and calibration activities. Technical training methods include:

- Reading and demonstrating job-specific procedures (e.g. cooking, grinding);
- Job shadowing (with an experienced worker); and
- Videos.

### Manufacturing Controls Training

Employees responsible for monitoring manufacturing controls (e.g. dressing procedures, cooking, formulation, allergen handling, grinding or cooling of cooked product) must understand the importance of the control points and the critical limits. They must also understand procedures for monitoring the manufacturing controls, how to complete the associated records and how to recognize deviation procedures and implement corrective actions.

### Calibration/ Maintenance Training

Staff responsible for equipment maintenance and calibration perform tasks that can affect food safety, yet these employees are often overlooked. They need to have the skills and knowledge to perform the specific maintenance and calibration tasks, keep records, implement corrective actions when required, and ensure that the equipment is cleaned and sanitized before it goes back into operation. It is also important that food products not be contaminated by maintenance activities. If breakdowns occur, food and packaging materials must be covered or removed before maintenance activities begin.



### Sanitation Training

Sanitation staff must be trained to understand written sanitation procedures, how to maintain the records they are responsible for, and which corrective actions to take when necessary.

Handling chemicals correctly is an important aspect of sanitation training. Staff must be trained on how to mix and prepare chemicals and how to store and separate cleaning substances away from food processing areas.

### Knowledge vs. Skills

Training involves providing people with knowledge, and then giving them the opportunity to practice or use it. If workers are simply given the knowledge but not the chance to practice it, the learning process is incomplete. Following are examples of the difference between knowledge and skills, and how they relate.

A food worker in a meat plant prepares, stuffs and cooks ready-to-eat sausages. This employee must possess appropriate food safety and hygiene knowledge as well as the skills to ensure that the finished product is produced safely and handled hygienically for sale.

The **knowledge** needed for this job includes:

- **Knowing** that raw meat is likely to be contaminated with dangerous bacteria and that eating undercooked product could result in foodborne illness;
- **Knowing** the appropriate cooking times and temperatures needed to make sure that the products are thoroughly cooked;
- **Knowing** the correct storage temperatures for both the raw materials and finished products; and
- **Knowing** that hands, clothing and the equipment used to handle raw materials can contaminate finished products.

The **skills** needed for this job include:

- **The skill** needed to check internal product temperature to make sure that it is thoroughly cooked;
- **The skills** needed to make sure that equipment is set at the appropriate temperatures and that thermometers are calibrated;
- **The skill** to wash hands and equipment in ways that reduce the potential for cross-contamination;
- **The skills** needed to keep the work area clean; and
- **The skills** required to take appropriate corrective actions when necessary.

## EXIT CRITERIA AND TRAINING FOLLOW-UP

It is a good idea for processors to develop a form of exit criteria for the training that is provided to ensure that employees understand the training materials and that any deviations are corrected before they become a serious issue.

Exit criteria can include, but is not limited to:

- Quizzing employees on the training material to ensure that it is understood. A quiz may be verbal or written, and might consist of multiple choice, true or false, or short-answer questions, or a combination of the three;
- Visual supervision of new employees by an experienced employee during the first few shifts;
- Asking questions or visual supervision of a new employee a few weeks after training to ensure that the training is still understood and applied to the position;
- All of the above.

Initial training should be supported periodically by follow-up training activities. Follow-up training does not have to take a lot of time. This can be achieved through short refresher meetings or by observing employees performing their tasks to ensure proper procedures are being followed.