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Safety Never Goes Out of Style

By Rachel E. O'Connell

» Does your foodservice team understand the roles that proper kitchen attire and footwear play in protecting employees *and* customers?

As school nutrition professionals, your work days revolve around ensuring consistency, high-quality and attention to detail. From the menu items you prepare to the equipment you pamper to the customers you serve, each of these areas requires a dedication to excellence. The same is said for the clothes you wear—but not only as a demonstration of your professionalism. Proper attire is essential to both food and kitchen safety. So, roll up your sleeves, don your caps and fasten your close-toed, non-slip footwear for this review of how to dress for school nutrition success.



aprons. Remove most jewelry and watches prior to preparing or serving food or while working around food-preparation areas. Avoid fake and acrylic nails and chipping/peeling nail polish or be prepared to wear gloves at *all* times. Avoid fake eyelashes. Change aprons when switching from raw food preparation tasks to service—and between tasks involving raw meat and tasks involving raw produce. Remove aprons whenever leaving the kitchen/cafeteria area. Use safety glasses when mixing chemicals. Make sure that oven mitts cover exposed skin and that uniforms are made from flame-retardant materials.

These requirements and recommendations weren't established in some arbitrary attempt to minimize your individualism. They are practical steps identified in the wake of numerous examples over the years of how inattention to these areas have contributed to incidence of **physical contamination** of menu items, the spread of **foodborne illness** and **employee accidents** in the kitchen, storage or service areas of a foodservice operation.

Physical contamination of food rarely gets reported at the national level (unless a lawsuit is pending). But we all know how unappetizing it is to find something in our meal that does not

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DON'T BE A FASHION VICTIM When you completed the food handler training requirements mandated in your state and community, you likely got an overview of the fundamental dos and don'ts. Food handlers should: Wear gloves for all food handling tasks. Wear a clean hat, cap, visor, hair net or other restraint. Wear clean clothing daily. Wear appropriate shoes. Avoid long, loose ties on



belong, whether it's a stray hair, a piece of plastic or someone's fingernail. As for foodborne illness, while schools have a good record compared to commercial establishments, constant vigilance is required to ensure, in this case, that bacteria are not carried by hands, clothes or accessories.

When it comes to workplace accidents, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reveals there were approximately 2.9 million non-fatal workplace injuries and illnesses reported by private industry employers in the United States in 2016. Although *School Nutrition* could not identify national figures about accidents specifically in foodservice settings, BLS confirms that, since food preparation areas feature many safety hazards like knives, complicated equipment and slippery floors, these employees "have one of the highest rates of injuries and illnesses of all occupations." Dressing for safety can be a lifesaver—in more ways than one.

Shelling out for protective apparel actually saves a bundle in the long run—especially in terms of medical bills, Workers' Compensation and the costs of absenteeism. Attire that's been designed with safety in mind is *always* likely to show a return on investment.

WEARING THE PANTS It's understandable that you may chafe at rules that show little regard for the comfort of employees who work long, busy days on their feet in hot kitchens. But know that your boss isn't *trying* to make you more miserable by requiring impersonal uniforms and footwear. They simply are looking out for your best interests, even if you can't see it.

Angela Haney, SNS, director of student nutrition at Los Lunas (N.M.) Schools, recalls having to crack down when some staff members insisted on wearing sandals while delivering summer meals to a site at a community pool. Since flip-flops were common poolside footwear by the public, her team members could not understand the distinctions of the foodservice setting. "We tried demonstrating what happens to an innocent tomato when a #10 can is dropped from a prep table," Haney describes. "The demo didn't work. Then, we had the county health inspector come and talk to them. Nothing." In the end, Haney simply had to lay down the law: "It finally came down to 'If you want to work, you cannot wear sandals.' End of discussion!"

As foodservice coordinator for the Oak Hills Local School District in Cincinnati, Ohio, Linda Eichenberger, SNS, has had similar discussions with staff. Neglecting to use non-slip shoes has "caused the *most serious* injuries," Eichenberger recounts. But the cause of the *most overall* accidents in her kitchens? "Failure to use a heat-resistant arm sleeve or 18- to 24-inch oven mitt when removing pans from the ovens," she notes.

"Protective clothing needs to be used in almost every [type of school nutrition] workplace," says Eichenberger, not just food-prep areas. "It protects the individual from injury due to blunt impacts, electrical hazards, heat, chemicals and more." Haney is certainly inclined to agree: "Kitchen-compliant clothing is important for both keeping staff safe and your customers, too."

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HOT UNDER THE COLLAR While rules regarding foodservice employee attire may vary from kitchen to kitchen, the story is usually the same: When safety is not actively prioritized, someone is bound to get hurt. **Burns** are among the most common types of kitchen injuries. Per the Burn Foundation, the foodservice industry experiences the highest number of burns among all sectors of employment—about 12,000 burns annually. In addition, the majority of those hospitalized for workplace scald or contact burns are involved in food preparation.

Following are some important considerations for the next time you shop for uniforms, aprons and other accessories for the kitchen team:

Safety. Will the product safeguard you from hot liquid, grease or steam? Is the fabric thick enough to withstand the heat generated in, around and from the touch of equipment like ovens? Effective protection from these elements can come from the combination of "thermal protective apparel components," such as a liquid/vapor barrier, insulation and the outer shell fabric.

Washability and Durability. Can the garment and other items be easily cleaned? You should buy apparel and accessories that are easy to maintain and hold up when subjected to numerous cycles in the washing-machine. As a rule, your uniform, oven mitts, aprons and so on will get washed more frequently than average street clothes or home kitchen accessories.

Here's a fascinating fact: Clothing that fades after several washings may not protect you as well as when it was new. Plus, whether your operation underwrites uniform costs or employees are expected to do so, no one's budget is bottomless—uniforms need to last at least the duration of a school year.

Comfort. Are the items comfortable? Foodservice uniforms should be of a breathable fabric. The fit should not be baggy, but not so tight as to be constricting or unflattering in a way that makes an employee feel self-



You can take this test online and pay by credit card.

conscious. Apparel that provides comfort and a sense of professionalism will improve employee morale; some research suggests this alone can reduce accidents.

Comfort for accessories like oven mitts and sleeves is also important. “No matter what you use,” advises Eichenberger, “it must fit well and be comfortable or it will not be worn. If it’s not worn, then it serves no purpose just sitting on the shelf or in a drawer.”

Ideally, kitchen staff should wear long sleeves and pants to reduce the amount of skin that can come into contact with hot surfaces. But if that’s too stifling in a hot kitchen environment, outfit the staff with oven mitts and sleeves that protect more than the hands. Also, always make sure that apron ties are secure so that they don’t accidentally drop near or into open flames or hot liquids.



IF THE SHOE FITS Inappropriate footwear is a genuine kitchen hazard. Not only do you need to consider the consequences of **slips and falls** (sprains, bruises, twisted ankles and broken bones), feet need protection from other common accidents, caused by dropping heavy or sharp objects, moving quickly in tight spaces, splatters from hot liquids and so on.

Shoes specifically made for food-service workers are “designed to keep employees safe. It is very important to have a non-slip construction to ensure

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1. It's okay for food handlers to wear ____.

- clip-on earrings
 acrylic nails
 ball caps
 high-heeled boots

2. Proper attire in the foodservice kitchen helps protect ____.

- employees from accidents
 meals from physical contamination
 customers from foodborne illness
 all of the above

3. In 2016, private industry employers reported ____ non-fatal workplace injuries.

- 2.9 million
 9.2 million
 2.9 billion
 none of the above

4. The food manufacturing industry experiences the highest number of burn accidents.

- True False

5. Proper footwear is only important in the kitchen; less so in serving areas.

- True False

6. When buying foodservice uniforms, look for thermal protective apparel components, such as a ____.

- a liquid/vapor barrier
 static retardation coating
 neoprene filter
 all of the above

7. ____ are considered helpful features in kitchen-appropriate footwear.

- Odor-eaters
 Shock-absorbing insoles
 Anti-fungal powders
 None of the above.

8. Gloves made of Kevlar are considered 100% slash-proof.

- True False

9. Vinyl gloves are good alternatives for food handlers who have ____ allergies.

- chemical
 polyethylene
 neoprene
 latex

10. Proper foodservice attire can promote a higher sense of professionalism.

- True False

TEST COMPLETION & SUBMISSION DETAILS

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they can stay on their feet, even when floors are slippery,” says Eichenbeger. Angela Haney agrees, and would like to *require* foodservice footwear, but because she can’t afford to pay for shoes for all her kitchen employees, she can only *recommend* that they buy slip-resistant shoes. Before you purchase your next pair of shoes for working in the kitchen, evaluate them based on the following questions:

- » Are the shoes slip-resistant? They should be able to provide traction on floors that are smooth, oily or wet.

- » Does the footwear have a raised heel or hard, smooth-surfaced soles? Shoes that are flat and manufactured with softer soles provide more traction on slick surfaces.

- » Are you required to walk or stand on your feet for long periods of time? If so, consider buying shoes with shock-absorbing insoles. They should also provide proper arch support.

- » Will your feet be covered adequately? Shoes should have a closed-toe and be made of a substance that provides some contact protection.

- » Does the shoe have crevices or hidden grooves that can hide dirt or grime? Always make sure to wipe your feet firmly before walking into a food prep area.

CUT A FINE FIGURE A study from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) found that 56.7% of injuries to those who prepare foods for service were burns, sprains, strains—and cuts. Meal prep typically requires work with many sharp objects. Proper knife skills and sharpened tools can reduce injury, but don’t overlook the value of cut-resistant gloves. Eichenberger wisely recommends that you tailor the glove material to the “task being performed.” Consider these types of materials when researching options for cut-resistant gloves:

- » **Kevlar®**. Made of a synthetic fiber that offers moderate cut, slash, abrasion and heat resistance, this glove can absorb up to three times its weight in water and oil, but does not hold up



well to chlorine and bleach and will shrink in the dryer. It’s *not* ideal for meat-cutting or packing.

- » **Kevlar® Plus™**. This glove has the same purpose as traditional Kevlar, but is 18% stronger.

- » **Spectra®**. Made of strong, abrasion-resistant polyethylene fiber, this glove is ideal for packaging and meat-cutting, withstands repeated launderings and bleach, but will shrink in the dryer. It is not ideal if used in or around extreme heat.

- » **Vectran®**. Made with a liquid crystal polymer material that offers similar abrasion resistance as Spectra, this glove withstands temperatures up to 500°F. Although expensive, it is washable, lighter than the traditional wire mesh glove, ergonomically designed and is made with chain links that can be replaced if they break. It is best worn for heavy-duty meat-cutting.

HANDS DOWN Gloves are ubiquitous to foodservice operations, but not all are created equal. **Disposable Latex** gloves provide elastic comfort in varying lengths and thickness, helping to prevent cross-contamination while preparing foods and protecting your hands from chemical-related injuries. **Vinyl (non-latex)** or **polyethylene** gloves are designed for use by people who have latex allergies. These provide better protection against chemical burns, but are not as flexible.

How about gloves for cleaning? You’re working with some heavy-duty chemicals and need to protect your skin. Address specific questions directly to your glove manufacturer or

distributor but, for the most part, the following materials used for different types of disposable gloves protect against certain chemicals:

- » **Neoprene** is resistant to mineral acids, organic acids, caustics, alcohols and petroleum solvents.

- » **Nitrile** is resistant to mineral acids, caustics and petroleum solvents.

- » **Natural rubber** is resistant to ketones, alcohols, caustics, organic acids and alcohols.

- » **Polyvinyl chloride (PVC)** is resistant to mineral acids, caustics, organic acids and alcohols.

- » **Polyvinyl alcohol (PVA)** is resistant to chlorinated solvents, petroleum solvents and aromatics.

- » **Butyl** is resistant to glycol ethers, ketones and esters.

STRESS THE PROPER DRESS

Appropriate clothing can be highly effective in avoiding many costly kitchen accidents. It’s also important for making a good impression on all the stakeholders who pass through the cafeteria environment and take note of employees. It’s a factor in professional pride, as well. Eichenberger reinforces this last point: “Kitchen-compliant clothing helps to inspire a sense of pride, authority and camaraderie among employees. It can also be an outward sign that you *are* a professional.” **SN**

Rachel O’Connell is communications & marketing coordinator for School Nutrition. Photo on page 56 courtesy of USDA.