

# SN PLUS

A digital bonus article from  
*School Nutrition* magazine.

## NO IFS, ANDS OR CUTS: KITCHEN SAFETY MATTERS

A refresher on everything it takes to maintain a safe kitchen and cafeteria, from food safety and allergy management to emergency preparedness and first aid.

BY DYLAN ROCHE



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**T**hen you're thinking about the health and wellbeing of your student customers, you're probably thinking about all the nutrients your meals need, or maybe what food groups need to be represented. But there's another part of a healthy foodservice program that's just as crucial: safe preparation and service. In fact, it's important for not only the wellbeing of your customers but also

your team.

A safe cafeteria requires a lot of considerations, from the way you handle the food to how you plan for emergencies to how you use the tools or equipment in your kitchen. It's about sanitation as much as it is about allergy management. It's about making sure nobody gets hurt and nobody gets sick.

Common sense, right? But if you're new to foodservice and dealing with overwhelm, or if you've been in foodservice for a long time and need a refresher, it's easy to overlook even the most commonsense aspects of a safe cafeteria. A skipped temperature check here or a carelessly

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stored knife there doesn't seem like a big deal—until it is. All it takes is one misstep.

With that in mind, it's always a good idea to reevaluate your kitchen/cafeteria's safety standards—maybe it's time to do an audit of your process and reemphasize the procedures to your team. If that's on your to-do list, be sure to consider all six aspects of a safe kitchen:

## 1.

### FOOD SAFETY

The first rule of a safe kitchen is being safe about the product you handle: your food. You want to make sure you're handling food properly from the moment you receive it, while you store it, as you prepare it and all the way through to when you serve it.

A big part of this starts with cleanliness: USDA's Guide for Food Safety Authority emphasizes that everything food comes into contact with needs to be sanitary, including a worker's hands, the utensils, storage or serving containers and prep surfaces.

You also want to make sure you're monitoring temperatures. Your freezer and refrigerator need to maintain their temperature (no higher than 0°F for a freezer and 40°F for a refrigerator); then your food must be cooked to a specific temperature (depending on what the food is) and maintained at a specific temperature through service. Taking the temperature with a routinely calibrated thermometer and then logging the temperatures will reduce the risk of spoilage or food poisoning.

Much of food safety comes down to proper training. You want to make sure everyone on your team understands how to properly wash their hands for at

least 20 seconds with warm water and soap, and they should do this before and after touching food. They should also understand that gloves are necessary to avoid bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat foods. Training also includes how to properly check temperatures, where to store foods (for example, at least

6 inches off the floor and away from any cleaning supplies) and how to clean surfaces and utensils after use. A properly displayed visual aid like a poster is a good reminder and an easy reference. For example, a poster near the sink reminds your team of the 20-second rule when it comes to handwashing (and that they need to use soap), while a poster near the oven could help them remember that ground beef needs to reach an internal temperature of 160°F but poultry must reach an internal temperature of 165°F.

## 2.

### EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

“What’s the worst that can happen?” It’s not a question you ever want to ask yourself, but it’s important that you do—and more importantly, you need a plan for what you’ll do when the worst does happen. In the field of foodservice, emergencies with a broader impact will affect what happens in your kitchen or cafeteria.

For example, imagine there’s a major snowstorm that affects delivery of staple food items. Will you be able to adapt your menu quickly? Or if there’s a power outage, will you be able to monitor the temperature of all the food in your refrigerator and freezer, potentially even disposing of and replacing it should it exceed safe temperatures for too long?

Liz Dixon, MS, CP-FS, Education and Training Specialist III with the Institute of Child Nutrition, emphasizes that proper planning involves thinking broadly and far in advance. “Don’t put off preparing for an emergency,” she says. “You don’t want to say it’s not going to happen—that’s not how disruptions work. There are the things that almost everyone deals with, like power outages, water outages, things that are universal in the United States. But then there are things that might not be as common in your area. Think outside of those normal disruptions and think of everything that could happen.”

An emergency could be big, like those power or water outages. It could also be small, such as a POS system outage, which is a mere inconvenience in the grand scheme of things but could greatly



affect the speed at which your service happens. There could be a missed delivery, an ingredient shortage, high absenteeism among your team because of a sickness outbreak or even a pest infestation that’s discovered mid-operation. You could have a lockdown or an evacuation while you have students in the cafeteria, or there could be a major environmental event (think tornado or earthquake) that suddenly happens.

In all of these situations, you want to reduce the need for quick decision-making by having a plan in place ahead of time so your team knows what to do.

## 3.

### FOOD ALLERGY MANAGEMENT

Food allergies are becoming more common, but at the same time, our cultural understanding of them continues to develop. So even though more children have allergies than you might’ve seen in past generations, with the right training and plan you can be better suited to manage them in your foodservice program.

Sherry Coleman Collins, MS, RDN, LD, FAND, a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist and a fellow of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, cites that 8% of children have a food allergy. While that might not sound like much, it could amount to one or two children per classroom.

Managing allergens is different from managing bacteria or other contaminants you need to worry about. “A lot of times, people think if they’ve cleaned with a sanitizer, they’ve removed the allergen, and that’s not the case,” Collins says. “Sanitizer alone

doesn't remove proteins from surfaces or hands, so even if someone is sanitizing their hands, they may not be removing the proteins."

Collins emphasizes that you need to use the right cleaning products for removing allergens from surfaces and utensils, though it's best to dedicate a specific space and utensils as an allergen-free zone if you can. This is also true when it comes to storage, as storing allergens close to or above other foods can cause accidental cross-contact.

In addition to prevention, you need to consider intervention for a situation where an allergic reaction does occur. Good communication among the teachers, nurses and school nutrition staff should include what allergies a child has, what the likely reaction is, and what their physician, allergist or pediatrician recommends in case of a reaction. This may include use of epinephrine, which could be specific to a student or non-specific, and should be kept in a secure location in the cafeteria, classroom or nurse's office.

One upside to this is that most children, even very young ones, understand their allergies. "Most children who have food allergies learn how to manage their food allergy and do really well," Collins says. "They're able to participate in almost all activities and live a very healthy, low-stress life when they're properly supported."

## 4.

### SAFE OPERATION

A kitchen can be a dangerous place: You're working with equipment and tools that, if mishandled or used improperly, could leave one of your team seriously injured. You're working with ovens that reach high temperatures, sharp blades that could cut more than just food and close quarters where workers could easily bump into each other. But it doesn't need to be dangerous, especially if you take care to train your employees on how to properly use and maintain all the equipment and tools they're working with.

Many of these safe operating practices will be similar to those you observe

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in your kitchen at home. For example, you always want to cut away from your body when using a sharp knife, or you need to wear heat-resistant gloves when you remove a pan or a pot from a heat source (while directing steam away from the direction of your face). Don't assume your team knows all the rules of safe operation—they may not be observing these practices at home, and proper training, along with regular reminders, will ensure everyone is on the same page.

Plus, in a foodservice kitchen, you'll also be using much bigger and more complicated equipment you probably don't have at home, such as a slicer or a large mixer. Employees need to be shown how this equipment works so they know how to operate it



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safely to avoid any injuries, clean it for sanitary purposes and maintain it so that it stays in safe working order. They should know how to recognize when equipment or tools are damaged so they can be removed from use before somebody gets hurt.

The more safety measures you can put in place, the better. Sharp blades should have guards on them, and your walk-in freezer should have a panic button inside. Even when your team members are being careful, accidents can happen, so these add an extra layer of safety.

Finally, remember that a major aspect of a safely operating kitchen is a clear workspace where there's a reduced risk of trips or bumps. And be sure everyone is dressed properly, with nonskid shoes and well-fitting clothing that won't get caught on equipment.

## 5.

### FIRST AID

Even with all the safety precautions in place, you'll still have accidents. And just as you need an emergency preparedness plan, you need to have a plan in place for when these accidents happen too. When somebody gets injured, such as suffering a cut or a burn, it's time to administer the appropriate first aid. That requires having the right supplies on hand and training your employees to use them properly.

The American Red Cross offers first aid kits "tailored to the unique hazards found in food service environments," as the organization promotes them. The kits include burn ointment and cold packs for accidental burns, sterile gauze and antiseptic wipes for minor cuts and even an eyewash solution in case someone gets sanitizing cleaner in their eyes.

Your team's first aid training goes beyond how to administer care to an injured team member—they should also know how to properly document any injuries or recognize when further medical assistance is necessary. Finally, they should know how to clean up properly after an injury or sickness, especially if blood or vomit is involved, to maintain a safe and healthy workspace.

## 6.

### FOOD RECALLS

At some point during your food-service program (hopefully not too often), there will be a recall of something

you've stocked. Maybe it's because the distributors learned there was a pathogen in their product that could make people sick, or maybe it's because the food was mislabeled. There could be any number of reasons behind it, but if a manufacturer or distributor has reason to believe a food could cause illness or injury, they'll take the food off the market and encourage anyone who has already bought the food to return it or dispose of it.

Safely handling a food recall has two parts: First, you need to monitor recalls from vendors so you'll know if and when a product is recalled; second, you need to be properly documenting your inventory so you can identify any affected products and remove them. Recalls will often pertain to foods manufactured or sold within a certain time frame (between this date and that date) or distributed through certain markets, so if you don't manage your inventory properly, it will be nearly impossible to tell whether food you have stocked is affected by a recall.

Once you do identify inventory that's affected by a recall, you may have the option of a refund. Proper documentation can help your program avoid an unnecessary financial hit—plus it will help you determine what needs to be replaced so you don't find yourself improperly stocked.

There's a lot that goes into maintaining a safe kitchen—this overview touches on the surface, but the specifics of your program's plan will be up to you and will require deeper research. USDA's [Guide for School Food Authority](#) and the Institute of Child Nutrition's [Food Safety Resources](#) have guidelines and suggestions for creating the best plan to serve your needs.



**Dylan Roche** is a Contributing Editor for *School Nutrition*.

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