

Gloves have become a fact of life in foodservice operations. Both the 1999 and 2001 versions of the FDA Food Code recommend that employees prevent “cross-contamination of ready-to-eat foods with bare hands by properly using suitable utensils, such as deli tissue, spatulas, tongs or single-use gloves”—popularly known as the “no bare hands” rule. In addition, more than 25 states have adopted more stringent regulations barring bare-hand contact by food handlers.

Yet a recent study at the University of Oklahoma, published in the January 2005 issue of the *Journal of Food Protection*, found that there was no statistical difference in the microbial counts of samples handled with gloves versus those touched by bare hands, adding to the mounting body of evidence that clean hands are just as effective as gloves at preventing foodborne illness.

Such news comes as no surprise to Matt Prentice, owner of the Matt Prentice Restaurant Group, with more than a dozen restaurants in southeastern Michigan. “Wearing gloves takes the focus off the need for handwashing,” says Prentice. “Hands that are dirty want to be washed, and hands that wear gloves don’t know they need to be.”

Prentice has a point. He’s seen plenty of employees don gloves,

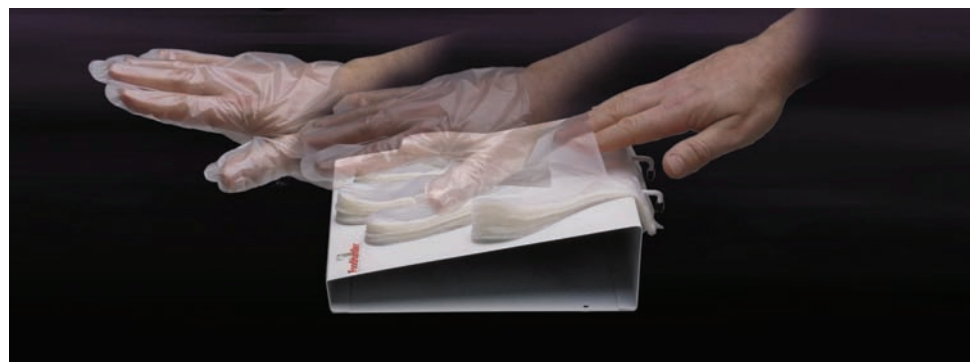


Photo courtesy of FoodHandler

then engage in hair-touching, smoking, garbage-hauling and other unsanitary activities—even go into the bathroom with their gloves on.

IT COMES BACK TO HANDWASHING

“It all comes back to handwashing,” says Lacie Thrall, CFSP, director of safety management services for FoodHandler Inc., a leading supplier of disposable gloves and other safe food handling solutions for the foodservice industry. “Nothing happens in the food prep area without first washing your hands.” Thrall and her colleague Doris Rittenmeyer, CFSP, national manager of safety management services, travel the country preaching the gospel of hand hygiene to foodservice operators—emphasizing handwashing first, and proper glove usage after. Both former regulators, they are well aware that handwashing is the single most important means of preventing foodborne illness.

“Proper” is the operative word when it comes to both glove

usage and hand-hygiene training. Despite advances in materials, durability and functionality, no glove in the world can make up for poor hygiene practices. “The regulatory stance is shifting to getting your whole hygiene system in place, not just gloves,” explains Jim Mann, founder and executive director of Handwashing for Life, which is devoted to advancing the science of hand hygiene with the purpose of reducing the incidence of foodborne illness caused by poor hand hygiene.

CHANGE OFTEN

Gloves must fit properly and be task specific, and they must be changed frequently. Whenever hands would be washed anyway is a good guideline to follow, such as when changing tasks or leaving the kitchen for any reason (disposable gloves are not referred to as single-use by accident). Most importantly, says Rittenmeyer, washing hands thoroughly before and after wearing or changing gloves is critical, including scrubbing with a nailbrush for 20 seconds and paying close attention to fin-

gertips—just as you would without gloves. There is even a proper way to remove gloves to avoid cross-contamination: pull by the wrist to turn the glove inside out as it comes off the hand, rather than grasping it by the fingertips, which are likely to be the most contaminated.

If handwashing is so effective, why wear gloves at all—apart from the local health department?

“Whether or not your customers are looking for gloves is an even bigger standard,” says Mann. “Especially in sandwich shops and other venues where food is prepared in full view, many patrons want to see gloves.” In fact, according to a recent study by NPD Foodworld, 82% of consumers gave a very high approval of an establishment where foodservice workers wear gloves, and 77% would select a restaurant using gloves over one that did not. “Gloves get noticed,” as Mann concludes. “It’s the operator’s job to make sure they’re used and changed properly, and that total hand hygiene is the primary focus of training.”