Food workers should stay home when they are sick

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Sick workers can spread disease, according to a food-safety expert in the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State.

(PhysOrg.com) -- A research article published in the February issue of the Journal of Food Protection presents disturbing findings to consumers, according to a food-safety expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

In the study, a survey of food-service workers found that about 12 percent said they had come to work while sick, suffering from symptoms such as diarrhea or vomiting. "This is alarming because these people potentially could have spread disease to the people who consume the foods their establishments were serving," said Martin Bucknavage,

extension food-safety specialist. "Foodborne pathogens such as Norovirus, Hepatitis A and Shigella often are spread by sick workers to restaurant patrons through the food."

In one flagrant example cited by Bucknavage, in July of 2009, a worker continued to work at an Illinois fast-food restaurant after she had been diagnosed with [Hepatitis](#) A. In the week that she worked, she potentially had exposed up to 10,000 people to the virus. "Even though many of these patrons immediately went to get vaccinated when the news story was released, 20 patrons who were not vaccinated became ill with that virus," he said.

One reason people still go to work while ill, Bucknavage contended, is that many workers and their managers don't fully understand the implications of foodborne illness, either on their patrons or on the business where they work.

"When an employee calls in sick and the restaurant is really busy, it is often the case that the employee is told to come to work anyway," he said. "Another reason is that these are hard economic times, and with so many people working paycheck to paycheck, it is difficult financially for those people to stay home from work.

"They need the money, so they go into work and try to hide the fact that they are ill. I also think that many look at working while sick as a badge of courage. They have this need to 'tough it out.' But in reality, these folks may be doing far more harm than good."

When someone has the symptoms of diarrhea, vomiting or jaundice, they should stay away from the workplace, according to Bucknavage. And if they have a sore throat and fever, they should be restricted from preparing and serving food.

"Retail and food-service establishments must make sure employees know that they should not be working with food when they're ill," he said. "At the very least, they should contact their managers and inform them of their illnesses."

Managers should include this as part of employee training, both when employees are new and then regularly after that as a reminder, Bucknavage noted. Managers also should be observant of their employees, being on the lookout for any of these symptoms. If illness is suspected, the employee should be sent home immediately.

After that, it is important to follow-up with the sick employee, and if it is indeed a foodborne pathogen, the manager will need to contact the local health department.

His recommendations are not just for food-service or retail food establishments, Bucknavage stressed, but also are important for those who prepare food for their families and those who work in child care or elder-care facilities. "Children and the elderly are especially susceptible to foodborne illness, so we need to take extra precautions when working with these groups," he said.

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