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No Reservations

No Reservations **is a monthly newsletter published by RQA Inc. for the restaurant industry.**

Inside this issue:

Main Course— Food Allergens Are Nothing To Sneeze At 1

On the Side— *Pathogen Spotlight: Hepatitis A* 1

Daily Special—*Le plat du jour* 2



Food Allergens Are Nothing To Sneeze At

Protecting all of your patrons from foodborne pathogens is a top priority; however, protecting your patrons from food allergens should also be a concern. While it may seem that safeguarding people from food allergens requires elaborate changes to your menu, the first and best line of defense is simply understanding your menu and practicing some basic precautions.

Approximately 15 million people in the U.S. have food allergies and, for them, eating just one bite of the wrong food can cause serious health consequences (1). Because there is no cure for food allergies, strict avoidance of the allergen (food protein) is the only way the person can prevent having an allergic reaction. Milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish, and shellfish account for 90% of all food allergies and symptoms can range from mild (itchy skin, stomach upset) to life-threatening (respiratory distress, anaphylaxis).

Eating away from home can be risky for a person affected by food allergy. Therefore, if a customer mentions he or she has a food allergy, take it seriously. Ask the customer which food(s) are problematic and help the guest select a menu item that does not contain an ingredient that could cause an allergic reaction. For menu items that are not made-to-order, refer to ingredient lists and if the information is not available, suggest another dish. Restaurants can be held liable if incomplete information is provided and the individual has a reaction(2). It is better to inform customers that their dietary needs cannot be accommodated as opposed to risking their health (and your reputation) with misinformation.

When placing the customer's order, servers should alert food handlers that the customer has an allergy so that every precaution can be taken to prevent cross-contact. Cross-contact occurs when food proteins are transferred from one food to another food via unwashed hands, utensils, and preparation surfaces. Because it takes only a single protein to cause an allergic reaction, it is important to prepare the allergen-free food separately and take the following precautions: wash hands and change gloves before touching the food; use clean pots, pans, and utensils; use only fresh cooking water or oil; and, when cooking in ovens or on grills, clean the food contact surface or cover the surface with aluminum foil. Lastly, when serving customers with food allergies, carry their prepared meal separately from other dishes.

Even if your restaurant is not in the position to offer "allergy-friendly" meals, protecting the health of customers with allergies is simply the right thing to do. From a business perspective, it makes sense to be able to accommodate the needs of individuals with dietary restrictions. However, whether or not you ever alter your menu, education and awareness about food allergies is a minimum requirement for appealing to this growing population of consumers.

References:

1. Branum A, Lukacs S. Food allergy among U.S. children: Trends in prevalence and hospitalizations. *National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief.* 2008. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db10.htm. Accessed April 30, 2013.
2. Rahm J. Serving Customers with Food Allergies. Retrieved from http://www.foodservicewarehouse.com/restaurant-equipment-supply-marketing-articles/product-safety-public-health/serving-customers-with-food-allergies-/c28192.aspx. April 30, 2013

Pathogen Spotlight: Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is caused by hepatitis A virus (HAV). This highly infectious virus affects the liver and can be spread person-to-person or via contaminated food and water. In the United States, some food-related hepatitis A outbreaks have been linked to contaminated industrially processed foods. Yet, the source of most reported foodborne outbreaks has been ready-to-eat food prepared by an HAV-infected food handler (1).

Symptoms associated with an infection of hepatitis A include fever, anorexia, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and, often, jaundice. In cases of foodborne transmission, the virus is typically spread when viral particles excreted in the feces of ill people are transmitted to food via unwashed hands. The infective dose of HAV is presumed to be low (10 to 100 viral particles) and high levels of the virus can be excreted for up to 36 days post-infection (2). Hence, it is critical to provide ongoing training to food handlers about the importance of scrupulous hand hygiene and the necessity to stay out of the workplace when ill. Concurrently, management should be able to recognize symptoms of infection, encourage ill food handlers to seek medical attention, and exclude ill employees from duties that involve contact with food. Specific and detailed recommendations regarding exclude/restrict policies for ill food handlers can be found in Chapter 2 (Management and Personnel), Part 2 (Employee Health) of the 2009 FDA Food Code.

Education, awareness, and support are critical for the control of restaurant-associated foodborne viral infections. Share this information with your employees and create an environment that encourages food handlers to stay home when they are sick.

Hepatitis A Virus



References:

1. Fiore AE. Hepatitis A Transmitted by Food. Clinical Infectious Diseases 2004; 38:705–15
2. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Bad Bug Book. Foodborne Pathogenic Microorganisms and Natural Toxins Handbook.. Retrieved from http://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/FoodborneIllnessContaminants/UCM297627.pdf May 2, 2013

Bakery, Los Angeles, CA. — April 2013

The bakery was closed by the Los Angeles Department of Public Health due to the presence of a rodent infestation and the harborage of rodents in the facility. The bakery was closed on April 10, 2013 and has not reopened at this time.

http://publichealth.lacounty.gov

Grocery Store Chain, La Puenta, CA. — April 2013

The retail grocery store was closed on April 1, 2013 by the Los Angeles Department of Public Health because there wasn't any potable water in the facility. The facility was also cited for holding the potentially hazardous food at unsafe holding temperatures and not having a public health license.

http://publichealth.lacounty.gov

Ceviche Restaurant, St. Petersburg, FL. — April 2013

The restaurant was closed by the state health department. The restaurant was sited with 15 violations -- four of which were high priority for temperature violations for food storage, employees not washing hands before putting on gloves, and for roaches. The inspector found two dead roaches at the end of cook's line and more than 25 live roaches on the back of the cook's line. Sandra Poreda with the state agency said those conditions called for Monday's emergency closure. "Those pose potential risk to health, safety, welfare of the public or establishment and employees," Poreda said. The owner of the restaurant stated: "We took it very seriously we've taken care of it found to be in 100% compliance and at this point we are ready to open our restaurant." The owner said the roaches have been eliminated. The owner of the restaurant also stated: "We do live in Florida it's a tropical paradise but it's a constant battle we take very seriously." The food temperature problem, the owner said, turns out to be plastic wrap around a coil and that has been removed. The owner said the problems were corrected in an hour-and-a-half on Monday, but they had to wait for the inspector until Tuesday morning to give them clearance to open.

http://www.wtsp.com

Pizza Restaurant, Ventura, CA. — April 2013

The restaurant was closed down by the County of Ventura Health Department because the facility was found to be in unsanitary condition. The health department also cited the restaurant for a rodent infestation, and no hot water available in the restrooms. The restaurant was closed on April 15, 2013 and was given permission to reopen on April 17, 2013.

http://www.ventura.org

For more information about these topics and others, please contact:

Dan Cahill
RQA, Inc.
Phone: 602-331-9151
Email: d.cahill@rqa-inc.com

Please visit: www.rqa-inc.com

RQA® Providing Solutions from Concept to Consumption

Insurance Contact:

Ian Hughes

Phone: 914-242-7812

Email: crisismanagement@catlin.com