

Understaffing Restaurants and the Risk of Foodborne Illness

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At the end of 2021, a survey fielded by the National Restaurant Association, showed that 78% of operators said their restaurant did not have enough employees to support customer demand.¹ Understaffing is not only an economic issue, but also a food safety issue. With fewer staff, many safety and operating procedures get shorted in exchange for service expectations. This has the potential to increase risk of foodborne illnesses (FBIs).

Going out to dinner with family shouldn't cause an impending feeling of danger. However, did you know there are more than 250 types of pathogens that can cause Foodborne Illness? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publishes statistics each year of FBI, such as hospitalizations, and deaths – these numbers are in the thousands.² FBIs can happen anywhere at any time, including one's own home. However, restaurants or any business serving food, have a higher expectation for FBI control and understaffing due to Covid-19 can result in an increased risk and additional liabilities to their food safety managers and establishments themselves

It is important to realize that FBIs can happen to anyone and can have varying degrees of severity. An individual suffering from something they ate can be devastating. It may result in missed days of work – which for some families mean that they can't afford to buy food for their dinner this week or are unable to care for their children. Or it may result in a several days stay in a hospital, among other outcomes.

The fear of contracting Covid-19 has caused millions of customers and employees to stay at home, resulting in a massive decrease of dollars spent on entertainment, gas, and food. This double-edged sword and has reduced the numbers of customers going out to eat and in turn, resulted in plummeting sales. Restaurants either can't stay in business, or they reduce staff to do so. The number of restaurant employees dropped by 2.2 million from 2019-2020.³ Unfortunately, many restaurants attempt to maintain status quo, but with a potential price to those who eat at their establishment. We are discovering the hard way that the side effects of Covid-19 may be indirectly causing FBIs from the circumstances at hand.

The value of the restaurant industry in 2020, after being adjusted due to Covid-19 is \$659 billion (\$240 billion less than projected).⁴ Restaurant managers and owners are trying to stay open and staffed, which, is commendable. However, a survey conducted by the Michigan Restaurant and Lodging

¹ Restaurant job growth remained sluggish in September, National Restaurant Association, October 2021. <https://restaurant.org/education-and-resources/resource-library/restaurant-job-growth-remained-sluggish-in-september/>

² Burden of Foodborne Illness: Findings. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/2011-foodborne-estimates.html#:~:text=Burden%20of%20Foodborne%20Illness%3A%20Findings.%20CDC%20estimates%20that,are%20hospitalized%2C%20and%203%2C000%20die%20of%20foodborne%20diseases.>

³ 2021 State of the Hospitality Industry Report: Technology Trends, the Future of Restaurants and More. Lightspeed. October 2021. <https://www.lightspeedhq.com/blog/state-of-the-hospitality-industry/>

⁴ RESTAURANT LABOR SHORTAGE: WHY ARE COMPANIES STRUGGLING TO FIND WORKERS? 360 TRAINING. <https://www.360training.com/blog/restaurant-labor-shortage>

Association found that 88% of respondents are operating with inadequate staffing.⁵ The public health sector has seen thousands of illnesses occur for decades and much needed new laws and regulations have been adopted to change industry practices that keeps up with current science. Another learning experience is upon us, and we are discovering the hard way that the side effects of Covid-19 may be indirectly causing FBIs from the circumstances at hand.

A restaurant with an eight-page menu, for example, shouldn't operate with a skeleton crew unless they have made other adjustments. Adequate staff are needed to operate the kitchen in a manner that is conducive to a controlled situation and ensures that corners are not cut on food safety practices. It sounds simple, but the risks understaffing poses to public health needs to be addressed and quickly. Labor violations can be common in the restaurant industry, which include not giving employees time to eat or take a break. These violations usually go unpunished since workers cannot afford to refuse shifts, speak up for their rights or even take sick time.⁶ Unfortunately, FBIs are occurring in understaffed foodservice establishments. Those employees who do continue to work, may not have the knowledge or experience needed to control food safety risks in the kitchen. However, having knowledge of food safety is NOT a predictor of proper food handling, especially with time constraints, poor training, and a general lack of resources.⁷

One of the biggest contributors to foodborne illness outbreaks is human error. Often, these errors are unintentional. For example, an employee is rushing or forgets to take the internal temperature of the meat being cooked and inadvertently serves undercooked (potentially harmful) hamburger. Or they place packages of raw poultry on a high shelf in the walk-in cooler, and raw juices drip on (and contaminate) the ready-to-eat foods below. Or they leave a delivery of refrigerated products out in the hot sun for hours, making them unsafe and unusable. These human errors are magnified when restaurants are understaffed leaving even less time to follow critical food safety procedures.

Cutting corners, working while ill, and lack of general food safety knowledge can lead to devastating outcomes. In 2018, a British pub chef admitted to disregarding food regulations and indicated he was rushing while preparing Shepard's pie which contributed to poor cooking, cooling, and reheating steps necessary to control potential pathogen survival or growth in food products. As a result, one person died and 30 people were sickened. The chef was ultimately given a four-month jail sentence, community service, and a large fine.⁸

These situations have the potential to end up in litigation. If a restaurant does have insurance, it may not be sufficient to cover medical costs of ill customers. Foodservice establishments must be compliant with applicable rules and regulations to protect their reputation and ultimately their pocketbook.

During FBI investigations, I have had heart-wrenching conversations including with a young husband whose wife was on life support from *E. coli* O15:H7. Conversations with a mother whose son is lying on the bathroom floor screaming as he suffers from vomiting and diarrhea simultaneously after consuming a "healthy shake" and the list could go on and on. Ignoring proper food safety procedures has proven to be devastating.

The solution sounds easy, right? – Do not operate with inadequate staff. But what determines "inadequate staff?" I can surmise that deciding to close or reduce staff is one of the most difficult decisions for a manager or owner to make. Businesses are condensing their menus, which is a positive

⁵ 90 percent of state restaurants, hotels are understaffed as industry struggles to survive <https://www.fox2detroit.com/news/90-percent-of-state-restaurants-hotels-are-understaffed-as-industry-struggles-to-survive>

⁶ RESTAURANT LABOR SHORTAGE: WHY ARE COMPANIES STRUGGLING TO FIND WORKERS? 360 TRAINING. <https://www.360training.com/blog/restaurant-labor-shortage>

⁷ Assessing Factors Contributing to Food Safety Culture in Retail Food Establishments. FOOD PROTECTION TRENDS | AUGUST 2012 <https://www.foodprotection.org/files/food-protection-trends/Aug-12-Neal.pdf>

⁸ Chef sentenced after deadly shepherd's pie strikes down 32 people with food poisoning, killing one. Ben Chapman. December 2021. <https://www.gbnews.uk/news/chef-sentenced-after-deadly-shepherds-pie-strikes-down-32-people-with-food-poisoning-killing-one/170302>

approach, as well as decreasing hours of operation and decreasing available tables. Evaluating food processes to 'build-out' food safety risks by partnering with a food safety expert can decrease steps, save time, improve efficiency, and reduce food safety hazards. If there is an alleged exposure, then working with a qualified food safety expert/consultant, can help identify, respond, and investigate claims related to food, food packaging and processes. These investigations can include:

- Auditing food safety procedures at the restaurant and manufacturer
- Investigate food damage claims related to product safety and product quality.
- Identify causation of food microbial contamination as well as physical contamination of food products
- Evaluate compliance in food industry regulations regarding of standards of care
- Investigation of food allergen allegations
- Crisis Management- food-related incidents such as illnesses, recalls, aseptic sampling, public health considerations and communication messaging
- Assist in environmental sampling following positive tests by regulatory agencies

Covid-19 has provided numerous challenges to the food service industry, but none that cannot be addressed with proactive measures and intentional planning. Many of these challenges are molding the industry for the future. By understanding how these challenges could impact food safety, we will be designing a more resilient industry in the future.

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