

Call to Action for Regulators:

Using Food Safety Management Systems to Improve Handwashing Compliance



U.S. FOOD & DRUG
ADMINISTRATION

Human Foods Program

What did the 2019-2022 Retail Food Store Deli data collection find out about Food Safety Management Systems?

The 2019-2022 retail food store deli (deli) data collection of the National Retail Risk Factor Study found that Food Safety Management Systems (FSMS) were the best indicator of whether delis were following important food safety procedures and practices to prevent foodborne illness. A FSMS refers to a specific set of actions or procedures to help achieve active managerial control over the risk factors. While FSMS vary across the retail and food service industry, the consistent components include the purposeful implementation of procedures, training, and monitoring.

Our study observed that a well-developed FSMS has a positive impact on employee personal hygiene practices. Our study also observed that improper handwashing remained one of the most common out of compliance risk factors, indicating that many establishments need stronger management systems to address it.

See FDA's Retail Food Risk Factor Study for more information and complete results of our data collection.

Why is food employee personal hygiene important?



Preventing Foodborne Illness: Frequent handwashing with soap and water, especially after handling money, cleaning, using restrooms, or touching potentially contaminated surfaces is a critical part of preventing foodborne illness. Proper handwashing by employees handling food products prevents the spread of pathogens like Salmonella, E. coli, and norovirus to consumers.



Cross-contamination Reduction: Retail workers frequently handle money, cleaning supplies, raw foods, and ready-to-eat products. They may also need to use the restroom during their shift. Handwashing between these activities prevents the transfer of harmful microorganisms across different surfaces and products.



Community Health Protection: Retail establishments serve large numbers of customers daily, making them potential points for foodborne illness to spread. Employee handwashing helps break transmission chains that could affect entire communities.

What does the FDA Food Code outline as handwashing strategies?

The Food Code utilizes two strategies to prevent contamination of food, equipment, utensils, and linens due to poor personal hygiene:

- Proper handwashing (how and when)
- Preventing contact with ready-to-eat food with bare hands

How can regulators work with industry to improve handwashing practices in retail food establishments?

Education and Training

- Model desired behavior – actively demonstrate and model good handwashing during every inspection to promote desired hygiene practices.
- Offer training materials – supply establishments with educational resources such as stickers or posters that illustrate proper handwashing techniques and list when hands should be washed.
- Targeted education – use visual and interactive training methods, such as “Glo Germ” or glitter glue demonstrations, to provide effective hands-on demonstrations of proper handwashing procedures.

Environmental and Accessibility Strategies

- Plan review – ensure that handwashing stations are strategically located near food preparation areas, warewashing areas, and restrooms for easy access by food employees. Verify location and accessibility during routine inspections to ensure any change of layout or relocation of equipment has not inadvertently created a barrier to proper handwashing when required.
- Assess facilities and supplies – verify proper handwashing sink setup to ensure they have warm, running water and are fully stocked with soap and single-use towels or an air dryer.

Behavioral and Cultural Strategies

- Conduct spot checks & test knowledge – observe employee practices during critical moments such as after handling raw meat, using the restroom, or before putting on new gloves. To help identify any potential knowledge gaps, ask employees about when to wash hands and the correct handwashing procedure.
- Address obstacles – assist the Person-in-Charge (PIC) with identifying barriers to handwashing, such as lack of time or multiple food preparation steps, and work with management to revise procedures to overcome any issues.
- Refresher training – when improper handwashing techniques are observed, offer real-time, non-confrontational guidance during inspections to reinforce good handwashing practices among food employees.

Encourage Food Safety Management System Development for Handwashing

- Assess Active Managerial Control (AMC) - regulators should encourage the development, evaluation, and maintenance of FSMS to address handwashing. Talk with the PIC about their procedures on when and how to wash hands, training programs around personal hygiene, and how they monitor and incentivize proper handwashing.
- Intervention Strategies – for jurisdictions that have completed a Risk Factor Study for [Standard 9](#) of the [Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards](#) and found handwashing to be one of the most commonly out of compliance risk factors, consider implementing a targeted intervention strategy to improve handwashing practices. For example, incorporating a handwashing frequency assessment during routine inspections, which can foster discussion with the PIC on strategies for improving active managerial control.
- Emphasize manager responsibility – remind the person in charge that they are responsible for ensuring handwashing policies are followed and that their emphasis on handwashing practices is a key contributor to food employees washing hands appropriately.

Resources

[The FDA Food Code](#) is the primary model resource for food safety provisions and provides guidance for handwashing in retail food establishments.

Below is a list of other federal resources available that can be used to assist in the development of FSMS in delis. We encourage regulators to utilize and share these and other available resources to make progress towards the prevention of foodborne illness risk factors.

- [Employee Health and Personal Hygiene Handbook](#)
- [Managing Food Safety: A Regulator's Manual for Applying HACCP Principles to Risk-based Retail and Food Service Inspections and Evaluating Voluntary Food Safety Management Systems](#)
- [FDA Bad Bug Book](#)
- [Foodborne Illness Video Testimonials](#)
- [Foodborne Illness Posters](#)
- [Free Training Provided by the Food and Drug Administration](#)
- [Food Code Adoption Toolkit](#)
- [Food Worker Handwashing in Restaurants | Restaurant Food Safety | CDC](#)
- [About Handwashing | Clean Hands | CDC](#)

Questions?

For more information visit [FDA's Retail Food Protection webpage](#).