

Workers' Health and Hygiene: Best Practices to Ensure On-farm Food Safety



People who handle produce on farms and in packing houses influence the safety of fruits and vegetables.

The produce safety rule from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Food Safety Modernization Act identified farm workers as one of the important routes of pathogen contamination. Worker health and hygiene practices throughout all phases of production are critical to minimizing the contamination of produce or areas that come into contact with produce with harmful microorganisms.

Key components of worker health

Workers who are ill or who have symptoms of nausea, vomiting or diarrhea can transmit harmful microorganisms to fruits and vegetables. Therefore, such workers should not handle produce. To prevent sick or ill workers from contaminating produce:

- Ask workers before they start work if they are feeling ill or if they have experienced symptoms such as diarrhea, vomiting, severe abdominal pain, nausea, yellow eyes or excessive coughing and sneezing in the past 24 hours. Workers with these symptoms should be asked to stay at home.
- Monitor the frequency of toilet breaks of workers who may appear to be ill. Workers who take frequent breaks may have diarrhea or be nauseous.

- Workers who have cuts or rashes or who have mild illnesses (i.e., common cold or allergies) should be assigned temporarily to a task that does not put them into direct or indirect contact with produce.
- If workers are injured on the job, provide first aid before allowing the employee to continue work. Any food that comes in contact with blood or other body fluids must be immediately separated and disposed of properly.

Key components of worker hygiene

The Occupational Safety and Health Act requires that employers of 11 or more field laborers provide toilets, potable water and hand-washing facilities in the field without any cost to employees. This standard also requires employers to provide one toilet unit and one hand-washing station for every 20 employees.

Hand-washing

Hand-washing practices are essential to a comprehensive fresh produce safety management plan. A detailed explanation of proper hand-washing techniques is provided in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FT5phge_JS0&list=UU45N2zrbZ_hglc53ANcAyAg.

- Hand-washing must be performed with soap and potable water before and after each toilet, food or smoking break.
- Hand-washing is critical after performing activities such as touching the face, mouth, nose, skin, hair, ears or dirty equipment and tools. It also is critical after handling raw materials, trash or garbage.
- Hands must be washed before putting on gloves.
- Hand-washing stations should be easily accessible and may be required in multiple locations, such as near toilet facilities, eating areas or produce handling areas.
- The "grey water," or wastewater, from hand-washing should not run freely onto the ground. It must be



diverted away from the field without pooling. If the grey water is collected, it must be dumped away from the production area or people and vehicle traffic. Do not dump wastewater near the irrigation water source.

Gloves

- Gloves are NOT a substitute for hand-washing. Before putting on gloves, hands must be washed properly.
- Wearing gloves on hands with small cuts and bandages will prevent produce contamination by providing an effective barrier between hands and produce.
- Gloves with holes should be replaced immediately.
- When disposable gloves are removed they must be discarded immediately. Do not reuse disposable gloves.
- Reusable gloves should be without holes and be washed and sanitized frequently.

Jewelry and clothing

During field work and harvesting workers should not be allowed to wear jewelry such as bracelets, earrings, necklaces and piercings. Encourage workers to wear task-appropriate clean clothes while at work. Workers should not keep items in their coat or shirt pockets that may fall into the product.

Eating and smoking areas

Designate an area for smoking and eating away from produce handling areas. Food must be at least 20 feet away from the field. Designated smoking areas should be away from areas containing produce.

Toilet facilities

- Toilet facilities should be easily accessible to workers and of sufficient numbers based on the

number of workers. The facilities should be situated so they are easily reachable by servicing crews and sewage transport trucks and with no risk of runoff in the event of heavy rain.

- On-farm portable toilets should be cleaned and serviced regularly and stocked with enough supplies such as toilet paper, hand soap, paper hand towels and potable water for hand-washing.
- A lidded trash bin with a foot pedal control for the top should be used to collect discarded paper hand towels.
- Soiled toilet paper must NOT be placed in trash bins. Train workers to dispose of all soiled toilet paper directly into the toilet. Inspect and verify that everyone is following best practices.

Signs

- Post signs in several locations on the farm that highlight best handling and hygiene practices.
- Use appropriate language, pictures or diagrams that are eye catching and easy to understand. Post signs in toilet facilities and at hand-washing stations to instruct workers to wash their hands after using the toilet or eating and after handling items other than produce.

Training

Worker education and training are important to increase knowledge of the on-farm risks of microbial contamination. Focus the training on the food safety risks and practices specific to your farming location and the commodities you are farming. Provide training in language appropriate to the workers and reinforce and update the training material regularly.



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Authors

Achyut Adhikari, Ph.D., LSU AgCenter School of Nutrition and Food Sciences
Charles Graham, Ph.D., LSU AgCenter Pecan Research-Extension Station
Fateme Malekian, Ph.D., Southern University Agricultural Research and Extension Center
Kathryn Fontenot, Ph.D., LSU AgCenter School of Plant, Environmental and Soil Sciences
Melanie L. Lewis Ivey, Ph.D., LSU AgCenter Department of Plant Pathology and Crop Physiology

William B. Richardson, LSU Vice President for Agriculture
Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service
LSU College of Agriculture

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