

Would Your Break Room Pass a Health Inspection?

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Maintaining a safe and healthy work environment is a fundamental responsibility for any employer. And, there's always room for improvement. For example, one location that often flies under the radar is the break room. As a place where food is handled and consumed, it presents the potential for employee health issues.

Would your break room pass a health inspection? Let's take a look.

Keeping food cold is one of the most fundamental food safety rules, and inspections often begin at the refrigerator. If your fridge doesn't maintain a temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below – the lower boundary of the food safety "danger zone" – foods stored inside can't be called safe. If sandwiches or packed lunches are already too warm for safety after a long commute, they might never return to a food-safe temperature. The only way to know for certain is to place one or more thermometers in your fridge, and adjust the settings if the temperature is too high. Hand-

washing facilities should also be watched with a keen eye. If you've ever had a "stomach bug" run through your office, you've already experienced the effect of failures in this area. Soap, disposable towels and hand sanitizer should all be plentifully available, and a sign detailing proper hand-washing procedure should be posted nearby. Ideally, you'll never use the same sink for hand washing and dish washing. The likelihood of cross-contamination skyrockets when you do. And, it's difficult to avoid if you only have one sink.

To make your dish-washing as safe as possible, provide a disinfecting spray or rinse that should be used before and after dishes are washed. Let the dishes drain in a proper dish drainer, rather than resting on a towel. Reusable fabric kitchen towels and washcloths absorb moisture and food residues, so they're prime breeding grounds for bacteria. Dry your dishes instead with disposable paper towels, and soak your washcloths and brushes in a sanitizing solution when they're not in use. If there's a commercial dishwasher on the premises, negotiating a daily "dish run" from your break room to the kitchen is an even better option.

The microwave oven in your break room is probably well used, and as long as it's kept clean it's perfectly safe. However, all microwaves by their nature heat food unevenly. This presents a potential problem, since prepared foods – whether a commercial product or leftovers from home – must be reheated throughout to a temperature of 165 F to be safe to eat. Instant-read thermometers are the only way to verify that temperature, and simple digital models are easy for even novices to use. Keep a few in the break room, along with a cup of sanitizing solution for them to rest in after use, and post a sign near the microwave explaining how to use them.

Attending to these critical points can make a big difference in your break room. The cost of providing the necessary materials is minimal, and the potential payback in employee health and reduced absenteeism is noteworthy.