

Personal Hygiene and Field Sanitation

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As warmer weather approaches, it's time to make sure everything is ready – and safe - for the growing season ahead. For orchards and vegetable growers, it's time to get everything ready: workers arrive and are trained, equipment is repaired, supplies are ordered. It's a very busy time of year, but it's important to take time for safety! There's one topic that's very important to your operation but may easily be overlooked –field sanitation and personal hygiene.

Fresh produce carries some risk of food-borne illness. In the United States, there are 76 million reported cases of food-borne illnesses a year. Many cases could have been prevented with proper sanitation and good work practices in the field. Safe handling of food products is crucial in preventing illness, and employers should help their workers to understand and follow the guidelines of good hygiene.

Workers should understand the importance of practices such as thoroughly washing hands with soap and water before and after working, using the toilet, eating, smoking, or handling garbage. Doing so helps to prevent contamination of produce, as well as protect workers from harmful bacteria.

Showering regularly and changing into clean clothes is important, especially for workers who may be exposed to pesticides. Workers should also know the risks of contamination of produce and the spread of bacteria. Any open wound or cut should be cleaned and bandaged. Workers with open wounds should be provided with gloves to keep dirt and germs from getting in the wound and from contaminating produce.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) developed and issued minimum standards for field sanitation in agriculture in 1987. Included are provisions for field worker access to appropriate toilet and hand-washing facilities, as well as drinking water. Non-compliance may result in penalties, fines, and legal action.

According to the OSHA definition of hand labor operations, anyone performing cultivation, weeding, planting, harvesting or packing in the field is counted as a field worker. Field sanitation standards apply to any farm or orchard where 11 or more field workers are employed on any day during the past 12 months. In New York, these standards apply whenever five or more field workers are working at the same location.

By New York State law, employers are required to provide hand-washing and toilet facilities for their field workers. There must be at least one for every 20 workers, and both hand-washing and toilet facilities should be located together within a quarter-mile walk from the work site. If this is not possible, they should be placed at the closest point reachable by vehicle.

Employers should provide workers with ready access to toilet facilities that can be used as needed to avoid field contamination and unnecessary delay of personal elimination needs. Facilities should not be located near a water source for irrigation or anywhere runoff would be an issue during heavy rains. Runoff has the potential to contaminate soil, water, produce and workers. Employers should have a plan in case of waste spillage and are responsible for ensuring safe, hygienic and private toilet facilities with adequate toilet paper for workers.

Hand-washing stations must include clean water, soap, paper towels and a garbage bin. Facilities must be kept clean, safe and sanitary for workers. Employers are required to refill stations with potable water, soap and paper towels as necessary, and remove and properly dispose of waste.

Employers are also required to have plenty of cool, potable water available for field workers. It should be in a covered container at a location readily accessible to all employees. Water fountains or single-use drinking cups are acceptable; dippers or shared drinking cups are prohibited as their use may result in the spread of bacteria and germs amongst workers.

It's the employers' job to ensure that produce and workers are safe this season by following regulations on field sanitation. By notifying workers as to the location of proper drinking water, hand-washing and toilet facilities, and allowing employees reasonable opportunity to use them, both produce and workers are protected from bacteria and germs that can cause illness.

NYCAMH can train your workers about personal hygiene, safe food handling and field sanitation, as well as other topics relevant to your operation, including tractor and machinery safety, chemical and pesticide safety, ladder safety, and safe lifting and carrying. On-farm safety programs are funded by a grant from the New York State Department of Labor Hazard Abatement Board. These surveys and trainings are offered at no cost and are available in English and Spanish. If you would like more information about this topic or wish to schedule a farm safety survey or on-farm safety training session, please contact me at 800-343-7527, ext 291 or email me at ameyerhoff@nycamh.com. NYCAMH, a program of Bassett Healthcare Network, is enhancing agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating occupational injury.