



Food Safety Best Practices for Farmers Markets

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Why should farmers market managers and vendors be concerned about food safety?

Food safety practices must be in place at every point along the farm-to-fork continuum, including the farmers market. Each year 1 out of 6 Americans will become ill from a foodborne pathogen. These pathogens can be bacteria, viruses or parasites that are spread by contaminated food. Figure 1 depicts the foods implicated in more than 1,500 outbreaks from 2003-2008 (CDC, 2011). Many of these commodities are commonly sold at farmers markets. Market managers, as well as vendors, should be aware of practices that will decrease the likelihood of a foodborne illness being associated with their products or at their markets.

Seven Best Practices for Farmers Markets

1. Sampling of Produce and Foods

Many vendors will want to showcase

their products by allowing customers to sample them. However, a number of local health departments do not permit sampling or have specific guidelines regarding the practice. Vendors should check with their city or county health departments to determine their regulations.

Concern regarding sampling is in response to foodborne outbreaks that have been linked to foods offered as samples at farmers markets. In 2000, 14 people who sampled produce offered at a Fort Collins, Colo., farmers market were made ill by a harmful bacteria, E. coli O157:H7. As such, the market manager should develop a strict product sampling policy and ensure it is being adhered to by all vendors.



Figure 1. Causes of foodborne illnesses in 1,565 outbreaks, 2003-2008 (CDC, 2011)

Any produce that is offered as samples should be thoroughly cleaned in water that would be safe for drinking prior to serving. In addition, if the produce does not bruise easily, vendors should use vegetable brushes to remove loose debris. All utensils used for cutting up samples should be thoroughly washed, rinsed and sanitized by vendors between uses. If cleaning and sanitizing utensils is not an option at the market, vendors should prepare samples before coming to the market and keep them in a cooler on ice. After being cut, produce releases nutrients that bacteria can use to rapidly grow if the temperature isn't controlled. That is why produce is considered a potentially hazardous food and should be kept cold (below 41 F) and allowed to remain outside of temperature control for no longer than two hours or one hour when the ambient temperature is above 90 F. The same approach applies to other potentially hazardous foods such as meats, poultry and dairy products.

It's also important to remember that someone's hands can be the source of contamination. Vendors handling produce should wash their hands regularly or use gloves and change them frequently. Customers should refrain from touching samples with their bare hands. Vendors may use toothpicks, wax paper or tongs, or partition samples into single-use

containers to keep customers from directly touching the samples. Samples should remain covered to keep flies and other insects away.

2. Personal Hygiene

Farmers market customers can be a source of foodborne pathogens. Customers should have access to clean, well-stocked bathrooms and hand-washing stations. While washing with soap and water is always best, the use of a hand sanitizer is better than nothing at all if hand-washing stations are not available. However, many portable options for both bathroom and hand-washing facilities are available. Market managers should use signage to direct customers to hand-washing and bathroom facilities. In addition, market managers should train vendors and other market workers on proper hand-washing technique and when hand-washing is appropriate.

3. Pet Policy

Unfortunately pets also can be a source of foodborne pathogens and should be restricted from the market area where food is readily accessible. This is the same reason that pets are not allowed inside restaurants and grocery stores. Market managers should develop a pet policy, publicize it to patrons through signage, and enforce it. Managing a pet policy can be much easier said than done, especially if a market has allowed pets in the past or if the market is in a temporary setting that allows pets under other circumstances. However, it is important from a food safety standpoint that this policy is in place.

4. Vendor Displays

Vendors should make use of every square inch in their display areas with

one restriction, the ground. The ground is an unclean surface and most vendors will not know what's been there before them. All produce and foods should be kept at least 6 inches off the ground to prevent contamination.

5. Produce Containers

It is best for vendors to use containers such as plastic crates that can be cleaned and sanitized between uses. While containers are a monetary investment for vendors, some funds are available to help defray costs as part of the Tennessee Agriculture Enhancement Program. More information about the program is available at http://www.tn.gov/agriculture/enhancement/prod_divers.shtml. Alternatively, vendors can employ single-use cardboard boxes, clamshells or mesh bags instead of wooden containers to hold their produce.

6. Implementation of Good Agricultural Practices

All of this work focused on best practices at the market is negated if the produce arrives at market with foodborne pathogens. It is important for fruit and vegetable growers to implement Good Agricultural Practices, also known as GAPs, on their farms to reduce the chance of foodborne pathogens contaminating their produce. Market managers should become knowledgeable of GAPs and strongly encourage vendors to have a food safety plan implemented on their farms. More information on GAPs and food safety can be found at http://vegetables.tennessee.edu/food_safety.html.

7. Regulatory Compliance by Food Manufacturers

Market managers also are tasked with

assuring all food manufacturers are complying with state regulations, and if the vendor is selling across state lines, federal regulations. Many market managers require food manufacturers to show their most recent inspection report from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture Regulatory Services Division to satisfy this requirement. The only individuals exempt from inspection and licensing by TDA are those selling small amounts (no more than 100 units per week) of non-potentially hazardous foods, which include products like baked goods. More information about the regulatory considerations for manufactured foods is available in UT Extension publication PB 1399 "Getting Started in a Food Manufacturing Business in Tennessee" at <https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/pb1399.pdf>.

What Food Safety Can Do for Farmers Market Managers and Vendors

Food safety is a great marketing tool because consumers find it extremely important. For a marketing advantage, farmers market managers and vendors should make sure that customers know that steps have been taken to implement best practices. UT Extension can provide managers and vendors with assistance for ongoing training opportunities. For more information, contact Faith Critzer at faithc@utk.edu or 865-974-7274.

References:

CDC. 2011.
www.cdc.gov/foodborneburden/cdc-and-food-safety.html

ag.tennessee.edu

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