



How to Avoid Foodborne Illness at Restaurants

By Lambeth Hochwald and Michael Gollust

It's challenging to keep our nation's nearly one million restaurants up to code, says Chris Gordon, of the National Restaurant Association in Washington, D.C. "But there are more than 30,000 health inspectors across the country," he says, and you can add to their ranks by doing these four things.

Put on your inspector hat

Look for inspection reports and a ServSafe certificate that states that the manager or employees are certified in food safety. Inspection reports should state the date of the last inspection.

Check out the restroom

It can be a good barometer of the overall cleanliness of a place, experts say. The bathroom should have an "Employees must wash hands" sign and a form that shows when it was last cleaned.

Keep an eye on the salad bar

Serve-yourself food bars should be kept at 41 degrees F or below for cold food, and 135 degrees or higher for hot food, says Cynthia Ann Chandler, MS, RD, a nutrition and food-safety instructor at Sullivan University's National Center for Hospitality Studies in Louisville, Kentucky.

Look for an employee nearby who monitors the bar to make sure food is kept at the right temperature and free of flies; he or she should also ensure that patrons don't return with dirty plates and silverware or use hands to dish up food, she says. If ice has melted around the bar or heated food doesn't look hot or has formed a crust, don't eat it and inform the manager. The same rules apply to burrito bars, baked potato bars, frozen yogurt bars, and any kind of buffet.

Scan the staff

Restaurant employees in the front and back of the house should have their hair pulled back and be in uniform. "Employee clothing should also be reasonably clean," Chandler says. "Watch to make sure the workers' sleeves aren't touching the foods as they're cutting or serving, and be sure he or she isn't using a dirty rag to clean your table." Keep an eye out for common mistakes, like a worker using a food-chopping knife to slice open a box of supplies.

Employees shouldn't have any uncovered cuts or sores or appear sick (coughing, nose running). In an alarming [Dateline](#) report, investigators revealed how bad it could get. They reported on fast-food customers being handed a cup and change with blood on them.