

FOOD SAFETY FAQs

The following questions are routinely asked of the Food Protection Division. The answers were derived from 410 IAC 7-20, Indiana Retail Food Establishment Sanitation Requirements.

Q: Are food employees required to wear hair restraints and what is considered effective?

A: YES. All food employees engaged in open food handling are required to wear effective hair restraints designed and worn to prevent hair from contaminating food and food-contact surfaces. Wait staff who present a minimal risk and staff only dispensing beverages and pre-packaged foods, are not required to wear hair restraints.

As for what is considered effective ... it is different from situation to situation. In general, it must be a restraint that effectively holds the hair back and reduces the likelihood that stray hairs will fall off of the head during work – such as a net, hat or visor.

Q: Are food employees allowed to wear jewelry while working with food?

A: Jewelry (including rings, watches, bracelets, etc.) cannot be worn by employees during open food handling activities. Plain wedding bands and medical bracelets are acceptable.

Pieces of the jewelry may fall off and into the food presenting a physical hazard to the consumer. Even more importantly, these items are very difficult to keep clean and present a medium for possible bacterial growth.

Q: Are food employees allowed to chew gum while preparing food?

A: NO. Employees may only consume food (and gum is considered food) and use tobacco products in designated break areas that are separate from all food handling and dishwashing areas.

Q: Are food employees allowed to wear artificial fingernails while preparing food?

A: NO. Employees must maintain a high degree of personal cleanliness while engaged in open food handling. Artificial nails and nail polish present a physical hazard if they fall off into food. More importantly, artificial fingernails are difficult to keep properly clean and therefore may present a medium for bacterial growth.

For these reasons, artificial fingernails and fingernail polish are not allowed to be used by employees engaged in open food handling processes. If they are worn, they must be protected by using single-use gloves whenever engaged in food handling.

Q: Is there any advantage to using “anti-bacterial” soap over other kinds of soap?

A: For general handwashing purposes, the answer is “no”. Let’s review the handwashing process which requires several steps: wetting hands with warm water, adding soap, rubbing hands together vigorously for at least 20 seconds, rinsing thoroughly, and wiping dry with a disposable paper towel or using a hand-drying device. This process, when done properly, removes the bacteria present on the hands. It is the process that works, not JUST the soap.

Present food codes do not specify any particular type of soap, only that soap be used. If hands are properly rinsed and dried after washing, any residual effect from antibacterial soaps is gone. **And REMEMBER:** hand sanitizers are never a substitute for handwashing and should only be used after proper handwashing has taken place.

Q: Do food employees have to wash their hands after they handle money and before they handle food? Don’t they have to wear gloves?

A: In accordance with 410 IAC 7-20, Section 107, employees (prior to handling food) must wash their hands after any activity that may have contaminated their hands. Therefore, since money is dirty/soiled, they must wash their hands after handling money and before handling food.

As to whether money could support pathogenic growth -- According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, paper currency contains fungicidal and bacterial agents. Furthermore, a 1973 survey revealed low numbers of organisms on metal coins. They do not consider paper currency nor metal coins to be likely fomites.

Q: Is it acceptable for food handlers to handle food with their bare hands?

A: In general, the answer is no. The Food Code, 410 IAC 7-20, stipulates that bare hand contact with ready-to-eat foods (foods that will not be undergoing any further cooking) be minimized. The Indiana State Department of Health has recently sent out an interpretation on that section indicating that bare hand contact with ready-to-eat foods should be prevented altogether. Therefore, the use of a proper utensil or single-use gloves is required when handling ready-to-eat foods.