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UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

EXTENSION

CULTIVATING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Farm Worker Hygiene

Hygiene Practices for Farm Workers

Good hygiene among farm workers is critical to assuring safe produce. Hands and personal items like clothing or jewelry can introduce physical adulterants or contaminate food with pathogens (bacteria, viruses or parasites that can make people sick) which can cause gastrointestinal or respiratory disease.

Hand Washing Facilities

Provide easy access to fully-stocked hand washing facilities for workers. Hand washing stations should be located in all food packing areas, as well as in the field if a building with hand washing facilities is not near by and easily accessible. Field hand washing stations can be inside commercial portable toilets or exist separately as mobile hand washing stations. Gray water from field hand washing stations must be drained into an area away from crops to reduce the chance of contaminating the edible portion of a crop .

Farm Worker Hand Washing Policies

Instruct workers how to properly wash their hands **prior to** handling produce, or **after** an activity in which hands can potentially become contaminated (see side bar). Expectations for proper hand washing should be clearly made at employee orientation and/or meetings, in employee manuals, and through signage.

Hand Washing Signs

Place hand washing signs in strategic areas including restrooms, break areas, and rinse and pack sheds to reinforce farm policies. Signs will last longer if laminated or enclosed in a plastic sleeve. Hand washing signs can easily be found on the internet including:

When to Wash Your Hands [http://www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/Documents/When to Wash Hands Poster.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/Documents/When_to_Wash_Hands_Poster.pdf)

How to Wash Your Hands [http://www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/Documents/How to Wash Hands Poster.pdf](http://www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/Documents/How_to_Wash_Hands_Poster.pdf)

Search the internet for hand washing signs in languages appropriate for workers on your farm. Bilingual (English/Spanish) signs can be found at: <http://food.unl.edu/web/safety/handwashing-spanish>



Components of a hand washing station: sink, soap, paper towels, hand washing sign, and trash receptacle (under towels).

Employees should wash hands before harvesting and handling produce and after:

- Eating or smoking
- Working in the field
- Handling animals or animal products (e.g., bedding, manure)
- Using the restroom
- Emptying trash
- Working with unfinished compost
- Using pesticides fertilizers and cleaning chemicals
- Working with vermin traps
- Blowing nose or sneezing into hands

Hand Washing Basics Explained

All workers should be trained and understand proper hand washing technique. As part of their training, explain that steps include:

- Wet hands. Cold water is fine.
- Apply a liquid or powdered soap (this should be unscented but does **not** need to be antimicrobial).
- Scrub hands including between fingers, backs of hands, wrists and under nails (this part should take 15-20 seconds).
- Rinse hands until no soap remains.
- Dry hands with a single-use paper towel. This is important so that employees don't wipe their hands on their clothing as a method of drying and inadvertently contaminate their hands.

Hand Washing Water Source

Make sure water used for hand washing is potable (suitable for drinking). Test the hand washing water source according to the Water Quality Testing Guidelines for Agricultural Water Sources, available at: www.uvm.edu/sustainableagriculture/Documents/gapwaterquality.pdf

Human Hygiene in the Field

Human feces can contaminate crops or surface water with pathogens if workers do not have access to or do not use properly maintained toilets. Provide transportation or portable toilets when fields are farther than 1/4 mile from a restroom*. Locate portable toilets down slope, below grade, or at a sufficient distance from produce fields or handling areas to avoid contamination in the event of a spill. All rest rooms should have a hand washing station in close proximity.

Hand Washing and Rest Room Facility Maintenance

As part of your farm maintenance plan, assure that rest rooms and hand washing stations are cleaned, checked, and stocked regularly. If renting portable toilets, establish a maintenance schedule with your vendor and write a remediation plan should spillage, leakage, or malfunction occur. Inform workers about who to contact if facilities malfunction or are not adequately stocked.

**Required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).*

April 2013. Center for Sustainable Agriculture, University of Vermont Extension. <http://www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/?Page=gaphome.html>

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Check soap dispenser levels often so that employees are always able to properly wash their hands.



For multiple fields not in close proximity (within 5 minutes) to a bathroom facility, load a portable toilet and hand washing station onto a trailer that can be moved from field to field with workers.

Human hands can efficiently carry human and plant pathogens. Investing in hand washing stations and supplies promotes healthy crops, workers, and customers.