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# SP746-A Developing a Worker Health and Hygiene Program for Fruit and Vegetable Harvesting and Packing Operations

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## Good Agricultural Practices Series

# Developing a Worker Health and Hygiene Program for Fruit and Vegetable Harvesting and Packing Operations

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### What is the importance of worker health and hygiene?

Farm operators should take steps to develop worker hygiene policies, appropriately train all employees on these policies, and document worker hygiene training. Pathogenic, or disease-causing, microorganisms can be spread to fresh fruits and vegetables from employees if they are ill and actively shedding those pathogens in their stools. Open sores and lack of hygiene also can be routes for contaminating produce. Therefore, it is essential for workers to understand and practice appropriate personal hygiene to reduce the likelihood of contaminating produce or the surrounding environment (e.g., water, field, packinghouse) or spreading illness to other workers.

### What should be included in my on-farm worker hygiene program?

*Basic employee hygiene.* Employees should be instructed to wear clean clothes and bathe on a regular basis before coming to work. Any boils, sores or cuts must be covered with a waterproof dressing, such as a bandage and a glove on a hand. In instances when wounds cannot be covered, workers should not be allowed to handle produce or come in contact with equipment or packaging. Other hygienic

practices that may be considered are trimming fingernails, excluding personal items from pockets, restricting jewelry, and restraining hair with hats, bandannas, hairnets or beardnets for facial hair.

*Hand-washing practices.* The operator should establish when the employees are to wash their hands and assure adherence to these practices through training and signage at hand-washing stations. Employees should be instructed to wash their hands for at least 20 seconds using soap and water while vigorously scrubbing hands and under fingernails and to dry their hands with a single-use paper towel. Workers should wash their hands before starting work, after using the toilet, eating, drinking, smoking, or any time their hands may have been contaminated. Hand-washing facilities must be accessible to employees. A hand-washing station should be located within a quarter mile of each employee at all times.

*Toilet use.* Employees should understand that they are expected to use toilets and should not urinate or defecate in or near the field or around the packinghouse. This scenario could be a source of contamination for produce and creates an unsanitary environment. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) dictates the

number of toilets that must be provided based on worker numbers (Table 1). Again, these facilities must not be farther than a quarter mile from each employee at all times, and hand-washing facilities must be located within close proximity to toilets. The operator also should make sure that these facilities are clean, in good working order, and properly stocked with soap, water and single-use towels. Signage reinforcing appropriate toilet use also should be provided.

**Table 1. Number of toilets required by number of employees.**

Number of employees	Minimum number of toilets <sup>1</sup>
1 to 15	1
16 to 35	2
36 to 55	3
56 to 80	4
81 to 110	5
111 to 150	6
Over 150	1 additional fixture per 40 employees

*Establish an illness policy.* Ill workers should be excluded from working directly or indirectly with produce. Ill workers can contaminate produce easily and make other workers ill. Signs of illness include fatigue, fever, diarrhea and vomiting. Employees should be instructed not to work if they are exhibiting any of these symptoms and should not be allowed to return to work until they are symptom-free for 24 hours. If employees are displaying signs of jaundice, a written release from a medical practitioner should be obtained prior to returning to work. Managers and operators should become familiar with these signs and, when observed, should prohibit any employees from continuing work.

*Blood and bodily fluids policy.* The farm also should include a written policy that specifies the procedures and handling or disposition of food or food-contact surfaces that have been in contact with blood or other bodily fluids. Food-contact surfaces that are not disposable should be cleaned thoroughly with a detergent, rinsed with potable

<sup>1</sup>Where toilet facilities will not be used by women, urinals may be provided instead of water closets, except that the number of water closets in such cases shall not be reduced to less than two-thirds of the minimum specified.

water and sanitized prior to being put back in service. Produce and any disposable food-contact surfaces should be thrown away. The impacted person should be removed from the harvesting location and attended to with a first-aid kit or other medical interventions.

*Employee food and drink policy.* The owner should develop a policy that states that employees cannot have food in the field or packinghouse. The owner should also designate a break area where it is appropriate for employees to eat and drink and that is located away from produce and food-contact surfaces so as not to be a possible source of contamination. The person in charge also should make sure that employees have ready access to potable water at all times.

*Establish a training program.* Every employee should be trained on the importance of good hygiene, proper hand-washing, usage of toilet facilities, illness policy and dress code. When training, the operator should be mindful of the employee’s native language and conduct training in a language that the workers understand to assure that the employee is familiar with the farm policies. All training should occur before employees begin working, at least on an annual basis or before a new harvesting season. Operators also should document when trainings occur and check to make sure that employees are complying with hygiene policies.

*Visitor policy.* Visitors to your farm also should be educated on hygienic practices, and operators or employees should accompany them while on the property to make sure they adhere to your policies. Visitors should be required to sign in on a visitor log to document their visit.

### **What type of documents and records should I keep relating to my worker health and hygiene program?**

Documenting your on-farm worker health and hygiene program is very important. First, you should create a document relating to health and hygiene as described above, outlining the farm policies and practices that all employees and visitors are expected to follow. You will then need to create a series of logs that will be used to demonstrate adherence to your policies. These logs should include, but are not limited to, the following: worker training, illness/injury, blood and bodily fluids cleanup, toilet and hand-washing facilities cleaning, and visitors. These logs should be specific to your farm, but examples can be found at the following websites: <http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/rks.html> and <http://onfarmfoodsafety.org/forms-and-templates>.

## What if I have a you-pick operation?

Customer hygiene is equally important in you-pick operations, although it is much harder to control from the operator's perspective. Operators should provide customers on their farm with toilet facilities and hand-washing stations. They should promote their use through signage and by making sure that they are clean and properly stocked. Additionally, operators should encourage customers to wash their hands prior to harvesting produce. Operators also should restrict customers who are visibly ill. Other you-pick practices, such as not sampling produce in the field, also will help maintain a hygienic environment.

## Resources

Below are some additional resources that will assist you in developing a worker health and hygiene program on your farm.

National GAPs Educational Materials — Farm and Packinghouse Record-keeping Sheets:  
<http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/rks.html>

New Mexico State University Downloadable Food Safety Signs:  
<http://aces.nmsu.edu/ces/foodtech/gap-nm.html>

University of Minnesota Food Safety Plan for You (FSP4U): <http://safety.cfans.umn.edu>

University of Tennessee Vegetable Production — Food Safety Resources:  
<http://vegetables.tennessee.edu/foodsafetyresources.html>

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