

# Food Workers' Reasons for Working When Sick

## EHS-Net Study Findings and Recommendations

Sick food workers have been linked with past foodborne illness outbreaks. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that food workers not work when sick with symptoms of foodborne illness.

We don't know how often food workers follow this advice. If we learn more about what food workers do when they are sick, we can make recommendations to stop them from working when sick. Lowering the number of workers who work when they are sick can reduce the number of foodborne illness outbreaks.

### What the Study Described

The purpose of this study is to describe

- What happened the last time the food workers in our study worked sick.
- Why they worked when they were sick.
- What affects their decisions to work when sick.

### What the Study Found

Many food workers work when they are sick. Not many of these workers take steps to keep others from getting sick. Steps they can take include washing their hands more often and not working with food.

In most cases, workers make the decision to work when sick. This does not follow the FDA recommendation that managers should decide whether sick workers should work.

Many managers did not know the sick workers' symptoms. FDA recommends that managers base decisions about whether workers should work on the workers' symptoms. Managers can't do this if they don't know those symptoms.

Workers work when sick for many reasons. They include personal, financial, and social reasons.

EHS-Net found that many food workers work when they are sick. They work when sick for many reasons, including personal, financial, and social reasons.



This study was conducted by the Environmental Health Specialists Network (EHS-Net). EHS-Net is a federally funded collaboration of federal, state, and local environmental health specialists and epidemiologists working to better understand the environmental causes of foodborne and waterborne illness. Visit EHS-Net at <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/EHSNet>.

## EHS-Net Recommends

Restaurant managers and food safety programs should work to better understand why sick workers work and prevent them from doing so. Efforts should focus on

- Involving kitchen managers in decisions about whether a sick worker should work.
- Addressing reasons workers give for working when they are sick.
- Understanding what factors affect workers' decisions about working when sick.



### Key Terms

**Environmental health specialists:** public health workers who enforce health and safety standards related to food and other consumer products.

**Foodborne illness:** an illness caused by germs in food.

**Foodborne illness outbreak:** when two or more people have the same sickness after eating food from the same place.