

# Food Workers Working When They Are Sick

## EHS-Net Study Findings and Recommendations

Millions of people get sick every year from food. Many of these illnesses have been linked to restaurants. Food eaten at restaurants sometimes makes people sick because food workers handled the food when they were sick with vomiting or diarrhea.

Germs from sick food workers can get onto food if workers do not wash their hands properly and then touch food with their bare hands. If that food will not be cooked—for example, salads and sandwiches—customers who eat it can then get sick.

### What the Study Described

This study described traits of food workers who worked when they were sick. The study also looked at traits of restaurants where workers worked when they were sick. If we know this information, it can help us prevent workers from working in restaurants when they are sick. This will help protect customers from getting sick.

### What the Study Found

These findings suggest things that may lead to working when sick:

- Pressure to do so (busy restaurants, no on-call workers).
- Managers not knowing that workers are sick.

### EHS-Net Recommends

More efforts are needed so fewer food workers work when they are sick. Restaurant managers and food-safety programs should consider urging restaurants to create

- Policies that require food workers to tell managers when they are sick.
- Schedules that ease the pressure for workers to work when they are sick. One example is having on-call workers for every shift.

EHS-Net found that 12% of food workers said they had worked when they were sick with vomiting or diarrhea.

EHS-Net also found that food workers were less likely to say they had worked when they were sick if they worked in a restaurant that

- Was less busy.
- Had a policy for workers to tell their manager when they were sick.
- Had workers who could come to work to fill in (on-call workers).
- Had a manager with more experience.



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>.

More research is needed to better know

- Why restaurants with managers with more experience have fewer workers who work when they are sick.
- What other factors guide a worker's choice to work when sick. Factors could include
  - » Workplace culture.
  - » Severity of symptoms.
  - » Need for income.
  - » Views and beliefs about working when sick.
- The link between paid sick leave and workers working when they are sick.

