

# Food Safety in the Healthcare Environment

Protecting the most vulnerable  
from foodborne illnesses



# Introduction

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Food safety is an important issue facing us in modern times. The reoccurring challenges of maintaining a safe food environment in restaurants is a scenario commonly heard about, so it's easy to imagine how imperative it is for a hospital. Food safety is (and should be) a priority in hospitals and healthcare facilities. The dangers

associated with feeding vulnerable patients such as the elderly, young children and immunocompromised individuals, that may be at a higher risk of developing a foodborne illness cannot be ignored. Food should not be the reason for otherwise preventable fatalities.

## What is food safety?

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The term "food safety" refers to the manner of handling, preparation and storage of foodstuffs with the aim of preventing contamination of the product and subsequent foodborne illness (or injury) of the consumer. In the best-case scenario foodborne disease

outbreaks in healthcare environments such as hospitals are simply inconvenient; however in the worst case, they are life threatening. In essence, food safety encompasses the practices that are implemented to ensure that food products served are safe to consume.

## Why is food safety important?

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The nature of hospitals makes them potent sources of all types of infections. Infection control protocols are essential to prevent the spread of harmful germs among patients, caregivers and staff. Part of the healing process in a healthcare environment is a nutritious diet. In addition, healthcare catering facilities provide meals to support the optimal performance of staff who work under stressful conditions. Serious illness, preventable fatalities, wastage of expensive medical treatments, spread of infection to other patients and staff and

disruption of services can all occur as a result of cases and outbreaks of foodborne infection in healthcare settings. Food safety affects everyone, however because vulnerable individuals are more likely to be affected by low numbers of pathogens they are also more likely to suffer severe consequences of infection (than healthy individuals). That places a even more onerous responsibility on healthcare facilities to do everything they can to ensure that safe food is prepared and served at all times.

The U.S. CDC estimates that approximately 18-20% of foodborne outbreaks are associated with an infected food worker. Transmission of foodborne pathogens can occur from pre-symptomatic, symptomatic, and post-symptomatic food handlers. Transmission of infections is dependent upon the amount of infectious agent excreted, the degree of contamination, the compliance and effectiveness of personal hygiene, the stability of pathogens in food and environment, the virulence of organisms, the food type/amount consumed, cooking process, food preservation techniques, and immunity status of patients.

# Food safety challenges in healthcare

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Most hospitals in South Africa outsource the provision of food services. This however does not remove the liability for the provision of safe food to patients and staff. Hospital management must ensure that service providers comply with legal requirements and apply appropriate food safety management system standards. This should be defined as part of the selection protocol and also as an ongoing evaluation of the service provider. Regular internal audits by hospital

management of the food preparation facilities and food safety management systems is as important as any other infection control verification. Food service operators should have robust food safety training processes in place for food handlers and these should accommodate the often-reported high turnover of staff in the kitchens. Protocols for food handler health are critical to ensure sick food handlers who continue to handle food are not the source of foodborne illness.

## Which food safety standards will benefit hospitals?

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HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) is a baseline tool, which can be applied throughout the food chain, that focuses on preventing hazards rather than inspecting the end-products. Testing of prepared food is not an effective method to ensure safe food in healthcare settings as the results take time and food cannot be recalled. The focus must be on preventive measures.

The HACCP approach should be put in place, implemented and maintained permanently whether meals are prepared in a hospital or institution or by an external supplier. It is essential that all food suppliers involved in supplying to hospitals have a food safety

management system, based on HACCP principles, in place. Food suppliers should be audited or required to demonstrate third-party certification of their food safety systems when appointed as a vendor. The HACCP system is a universally recognized food safety system, which identifies and controls hazards that may occur, by strictly monitoring and controlling each critical control point of the food production process, thereby preventing the potential hazards from occurring. This would require proper storage and handling of food from receiving to serving in the ward, monitoring and recording food temperatures and continuous education for employees.



Your patients trust you to nurse them back to complete health. The last thing they expect is to contract a food borne illness in a healthcare facility.

Enteric viruses are particularly problematic pathogens as they are more resistant to heat, disinfection and pH changes than enteric bacteria. In addition, viral contamination does not alter the appearance, smell or taste of food. Lastly, viruses can survive for days or weeks in hospital environments.



## How can you ensure patient safety?

The majority of foodborne outbreaks in healthcare settings are preventable if good hygienic practice HACCP principles and prerequisites programmes (PRPs) such as the design and construction, waste removal and pest control have been followed. By ensuring that effective HACCP and PRPs are implemented and maintained, results may show increased patient

satisfaction, reduced hospital-induced malnutrition, reduced risk of foodborne infections and improve the results of food safety audits. Creating awareness and understanding of HACCP among managers and education regarding the control of risk factors remain crucial.

# Benefits of food safety

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## 1. Prevention of illness and fatalities

Hospital outbreaks are more serious due to the high population of vulnerable individuals and as such, an outbreak can result in subsequent disabilities or even deaths that could have been avoided. The common organisms that cause foodborne disease are easily spread if special care is not taken to ensure food safety.

## 2. Avoid the associated inconveniences and disruptions

If staff are affected, they are feeling unwell and thus not performing optimally, this could cause major disruption to services. This could also have severe consequences and disruptions for patients, especially if an outbreak has occurred and large numbers of staff unwell, ultimately resulting in major problems when trying to continue the provision of a hospital service.

## 3. Optimal performance and capacity

In severe cases, the closure of wards (and sometimes whole hospitals) not only puts strain on clinical teams in the affected institution, but also on those that have to cope with extra work as a result of their neighbour's closure. Furthermore, it may take months for services to return to normal especially where specialist institutions are affected.

## 4. Safeguarding institutional reputation

Protects your reputation and enhances the patient's confidence in the ability of the hospital to care for them.

## 5. Prevention of expensive medical treatments and other resources from going to waste

By preventing foodborne illness, healthcare organizations can prevent unnecessary costs. For instance, a bed is occupied by a patient or staff member affected unnecessarily by infection, this deprives someone else of treatment. Furthermore, the work days that are lost due to staff being ill or extra bed days added due to patients being ill can accumulate significantly.



# Food safety service offerings

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## System Certification / Verification

- BSI Catering Food Safety Certification
- ISO 22000:2018 Food Safety
- SANS 10330 HACCP Certification
- 2nd Party Verification Audits against hospitals own requirements (CA)
- ISO 9001 Quality Management Systems
- ISO 14001 Environmental Management
- ISO 45001 Occupational Health and Safety
- ISO 27001 Information Security
- Workplace Hygiene Verification

## Training

- Regulation 638 Food Handling and Food Hygiene Principles
- BSI Catering Food Safety Training
- ISO 22000 Requirements, Implementation and Internal Auditor Training
- SANS 10330 HACCP Training
- Customized training solutions specifically developed for your organization
- ISO 9001 Quality Management Systems
- ISO 14001 Environmental Management
- ISO 45001 Occupational Health and Safety
- ISO 27001 Information Security
- Workplace Hygiene Training

# The journey to certification

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Whether you're ready for the next step in best practice food safety management or you're concerned about protecting patients, standards can drive meaningful change in your healthcare facility. From an initial introduction to the standard through to training and certification, no matter how far along you are, BSI can support your journey. Want to know more about the requirements of these standards, the steps to certification or how BSI can help?

Contact us on +27(0)12 004 0279 or Email us at [bsi.za@bsigroup.com](mailto:bsi.za@bsigroup.com)

# Our products and services

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### Knowledge

The core of our business centres on the knowledge that we create and impart to our clients. In the standards arena we continue to build our reputation as an expert body, bringing together experts from industry to shape standards at local, regional and international levels. In fact, BSI originally created eight of the world's top 10 management system standards.

### Assurance

Independent assessment of the conformity of a process or product to a particular standard ensures that our clients perform to a high level of excellence. We train our clients in world class implementation and auditing techniques to ensure they maximize the benefits of standards.

### Compliance

To experience real, long-term benefits, our clients need to ensure ongoing compliance to a regulation, market need or standard so that it becomes an embedded habit. We provide a range of services and differentiated management tools which help facilitate this process.

# Why BSI?

BSI believes the world should be supplied with safe, sustainable and socially responsible food. We offer a broad range of food safety certification and risk management services to help all organizations in the food supply chain achieve compliance and industry best practice to grow their business. We're a leading food safety and certification provider with extensive auditing capacity and the capability to conduct integrated audits for a wide range of food safety standards across the entire food and beverage supply chain – including GFSI-recognized standards

Our service solution for food safety includes certification, training, assessment and supply chain software, providing you and your customers assurance enabling you to manage risk more effectively.



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