

# Most People Spreading Bacteria Don't Even Know It

Who do you rely upon as the last line of food safety? Whose responsibility do you think it is when someone gets a foodborne illness? If your answer to both of these questions is you, then you earn the gold star for the day. However if your answer is the consumer, then I think that we have to reevaluate our expectations. And that's because consumers tend to not control food safety risks.

An observational study published earlier this year shows that consumers are failing to protect themselves and use good food safety practices. The study was conducted by the USDA in collaboration with RTI International and North Carolina State University.

More specifically, the study found that consumers are not washing their hands correctly 97% of the time.

- Most didn't wash their hands for at least 20 seconds, and
- Numerous participants did not dry their hands with a clean towel.

34% of participants used a food thermometer to check that their burgers were cooked properly.

- Of those, nearly half still did not cook the burgers to the safe minimum internal temperature.

Finally, the study showed participants spreading bacteria from raw poultry onto other surfaces and food items.

- 48 percent of the time are contaminating spice containers used while preparing burgers,
- 11 percent of the time are spreading bacteria to refrigerator handles, and
- 5 percent of the time are tainting salads due to cross-contamination.

Keep in mind that in the US, it is the food producers and retailers that bear the responsibility for food safety in the US. Accordingly, you should be prepared for the fact that your consumers are not practicing good food safety habits and will most likely cross-contaminate the products that you sell them in their kitchens.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 48 million Americans are sickened with foodborne illnesses each year, resulting in roughly 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. Children, older adults and those with compromised immune systems are especially at risk.

So I ask you, what can you do to reduce the likelihood that you get wrapped up in a foodborne illness outbreak?

For the executive summary of the study reference in this article, see

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/wcm/connect/1fe5960e-c1d5-4bea-bccc-20b07fbfde50/Observational-Study-Addendum.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>

