

## Soap and Water Is Best Protection

By: Paulelda Gilbert, ISU Extension Nutrition & Health Specialist

**Q. What is the most important thing to teach my food concession stand workers this fall to make sure we provide a safe product to the public?**

**A.** Unwashed hands are a leading cause of food borne illness, says Sam Beattie, Food Science and Human Nutrition Specialist with Iowa State University Extension.

“That ‘24 hour flu’ you had last week was probably caused by Norwalk virus transmitted because someone failed to practice good hygiene before leaving the bathroom and/or preparing your food,” Beattie said.

An estimated 50 to 60 million Americans become ill because of the viruses found in human waste. Hand washing is the critical control that food service workers and consumers can exert to prevent this illness.

Proper hand washing does not require much work. “Warm water and soap are the most effective means of removing bacteria and viruses from the hands. It takes 15 to 20 seconds of vigorous rubbing of all parts of the soapy hands, including under the fingernails, to get the job done,” Beattie said. Warm water is preferable to cold or very hot water because people are more likely to use it.

Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not recommended as a replacement for proper hand washing. The contact time and alcohol level are not sufficient to inactivate the virus that causes most of the food borne illness. Hand sanitizers are useful to inactivate respiratory viruses that cause colds and influenza but ideally should be used on clean hands. Soil on hands can hide the viruses and prevent them from being killed by the sanitizer.

Beyond the personal inconvenience, food borne illness also carries an economic impact. ISU researchers recently found that people who get food borne illness typically miss at least one day of work. Assuming that’s also true for workers nationwide, that means about 55 million workdays are lost per year.

Helping food service workers understand the role they play in disease prevention has been one of the goals of Iowa State University Extension. Over the past five years, more than 800 restaurant employees have been trained in safe food handling through the ServSafe program offered by ISU Extension Nutrition and Health field specialists. Super Safe Mark food safety training for managers in grocery stores and convenience stores is also available.

Go to the web site [www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsafety/](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsafety/) to find a schedule of trainings in your area. Nutrition and Health Field Specialists also provide trainings for volunteers working at food stands and community events. Contact your local county Extension Office to set up a volunteer training with the Nutrition and Health Field Specialist in your area.

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 576-2119 or e-mail [pgilbert@iastate.edu](mailto:pgilbert@iastate.edu), with your nutrition and health questions. You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804 or visit the Webster County Extension web site: [www.extension.iastate.edu/greene](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/greene).