

Interviewing retail establishment staff during norovirus outbreak investigations

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Thank you to David Nicholas, NYS DOH, and Alexa Cohn, Cornell University

Integrated Food Safety Centers of Excellence (CoE)


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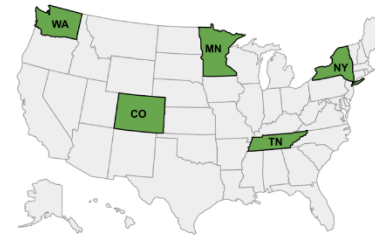

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Integrated Food Safety Centers of Excellence

The Integrated Food Safety Centers of Excellence (CoEs) is a CDC program started in 2012 under the authority of the [Food Safety Modernization Act](#). The CoEs provide peer assistance and training to support state and local health departments to build their capacity to track and investigate enteric diseases.

The CoEs are Colorado, Minnesota, New York, Tennessee, and Washington state health departments and their partner academic institutions. Each Center serves a region of the country to help guide jurisdictions to the resources that best meet their needs.

Online products developed by the Centers are available at: CoEFoodSafetyTools.org.



About the CoE Program

Learn more about the Integrated Food Safety Centers of Excellence

Centers & Regions

Find out more about each of the Centers

Integrated Food Safety Centers of Excellence (CoEs)
 Supporting and enhancing enteric surveillance and outbreak investigation

Problem	Solution
 <p>Every year roughly 1 in 6 Americans gets sick from foodborne diseases.</p> <p>Many health departments lack necessary resources or expertise to respond to cases of foodborne illness.</p>	 <p>In 2011, the Food Safety Modernization Act set up CDC's Integrated Food Safety Centers of Excellence (CoE) to serve as peer resources for other public health professionals that respond to foodborne illness outbreaks.</p>
Who are the CoEs? <p>The CoEs provide peer assistance and training to support state and local health departments to build their capacity to track and investigate enteric diseases. The CoEs are Colorado, Minnesota, New York, Tennessee, and Washington state health departments and their partner academic institutions. Each Center serves a region of the country to help guide jurisdictions to the resources that best meet their needs.</p>	

Outline

- **Brief review of environmental assessments**
- Preparation for the interview
- Conducting the interview

What is an environmental assessment (EA)?

- According to the National Environmental Assessments Reporting System (NEARS), an EA is “a systems-based component of an outbreak investigation that fully describes how the environment contributed to the introduction and/or transmission of agents that cause or could cause illness.”
- Environmental assessments are part of an environmental investigation (even though both terms are often used interchangeably)
 - Environmental investigation also may include sample collection, e.g., stool samples of workers, ~~environmental sponge samples~~, food samples
 - CoE trainings for stool sampling and environmental samplings are also available

Objectives of an environmental assessment

- Identify contributing factors
- Identify environmental antecedents
- Generate recommendations for informed interventions

Outline

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- **Preparation for the interview**
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Avoid the inspection mentality

- There is big difference between environmental assessment and an inspection
 - Often, environmental antecedents are not covered by regulations
 - Conditions and practices that may comply with local regulations may still be contributing factors or environmental antecedents of an outbreak
 - Example: A cold holding unit is holding time/temperature control for safety (TCS) foods at 44°F and the local/state ordinance allows a maximum cold holding temperature of 45°F.
 - The person conducting the EA would cite it as out of temperature in NEARS, but would not mark it as a violation of the local code as a part of the investigation report.

Before you leave for the interview

- Identify relevant electronic reporting sections or paper forms that you will need to perform an environmental assessment.
- Review the foodborne illness complaint and any available epidemiological information.
- Meet with epi, environmental health, and lab personnel to discuss the outbreak and develop a plan.
- Identify useful records to gather from the facility.
- Understand all the questions on the interview form.
- Estimate the amount of time it will take to complete each interview.

Understand the facility you're working with

- Is this a fine dining institution or a fast food restaurant?
- Is this a chain or independent restaurant?
- Review the facility's file. Look at prior inspections and any previous complaints about the facility. Are there any trends?
- Where is the food in the establishment purchased?
- Have there been any changes to the menu?
- Know the size of the facility and the layout

Understand the implicated pathogen

- Are you dealing with longer or shorter incubation periods?
- What are the symptoms of the infection?
- Are you dealing with cross-contamination?
- Is this typically a problem of undercooking? ~~Cooling?~~
- Are there additional (subtyping?) data on the pathogens that may implicate certain sources
- What are typical sources
 - Think past sick workers: oysters and mussels; fresh produce and fruits

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- **Conducting the interview**

Overview of the interview process

- The environmental assessment process involves interviewing managers and employees
- Should be performed during the initial visit
- Refer to your department's policies on interviewing food workers

The interview is more than the interview

- Some experienced individuals say that 50% of the interview is not the actual interview
 - Watch people and processes
 - Listen to people that you are not interviewing

Introductions

- Upon arrival at the facility, introduce yourself to the manager and food workers
- Explain the reasons for your visit
- Remain conversational and develop a rapport with the staff
- Maintain a friendly tone and demeanor

Conduct an on-site visit

- Element of surprise is key. You want to see the facility operate under normal circumstances. If they know you're coming, they may plan and prepare for you.
- Conduct an on-site visit before and after interviewing the manager and employees
- Ideally, observe the facility and what's going on before you talk to the manager and employees (i.e., before they are aware of the purpose of your visit)

Manager interviews

- Helps to understand policies and practices of the establishment and to learn more about the establishment
 - Part III of NEARS report form may be used for this
- Questions to ask include:
 - Questions about establishment
 - Is this an independent establishment or a chain establishment
 - How many meals are served each day?
 - When is the busiest day?
 - Are any foods prepared or partially prepared at a commissary or any other location?
 - Questions about the kitchen managers
 - How many managers are there?
 - What language do the managers speak?
 - Do any kitchen managers receive food safety training? What type of food safety training is provided?
Are any managers food safety certified?

Manager interviews – part II

– Questions about food workers

- How many food workers do you have? What language do the workers speak?
- Do any food workers receive food safety training? What type of food safety training? Are any workers food safety certified?

– Questions about the Establishment's Cleaning Policies

- Does this establishment have a cleaning policy or schedule for the cutting boards? Food slicers? Food preparation areas? frequently touched customer surfaces like menus, tables, and condiments? Are any policies written?
- Does this establishment have a policy concerning disposable glove use? Written?
- Does this establishment have a policy for cleaning up after someone has vomited or had diarrhea in the establishment?

~~– Questions about Food Temperature Policies~~

- ~~• Does this establishment have a policy to take the temperature of any incoming food products?~~
- ~~• Excluding incoming products, does this establishment have a policy to take food temperatures~~
- ~~• Are records of food temperatures kept?~~

Manager interviews – part III

– Questions about Employee Health Policies

- When food workers say they are ill, do you typically ask if they are experiencing certain symptoms?
- Does this establishment have a policy or procedure that requires food workers to tell a manager when they are ill? Does this policy specify certain symptoms that ill workers are required to tell managers about?
- Does this establishment have a policy or procedure to restrict or exclude ill workers from working?
- Do any kitchen managers (including you) ever get paid when they miss work because they are ill?
- Do any food workers ever get paid when work is missed because they are ill?

Manager interview – key NEARS part III instructions

- NEARS part III specifies that
 - “manager interview should reflect an interview with the manager that has the most authority over the kitchen AND is most familiar with the day-to-day operations of the kitchen”
- Format should be a semi-structured interview
 - If answers to form or interview guide yield “intriguing answers”, follow-up open ended questions should be asked
- Track length of interview

Worker interviews

- Choose the worker
 - Based on the review of information with epi, EH, and lab, who worked on the day of exposure and prepared food on that day?
 - You can always interview more than one worker
- Always interview the worker separately from the manager
- Interview the worker in private. If the manager says they want to be present or require legal representation, know the public health laws and what you can require

Worker interviews, cont.

- Make the worker your friend. Speak calmly, stay relaxed, and remind them that their answers will remain confidential.
- Ask the worker similar questions to what you asked the manager. Here you will learn the following:
 - Is there a disconnect between the manager and employees?
 - Do workers know the policies and practices?
 - Are workers trained the way the manager says they are?
 - Are workers told to come to work sick? Or do they feel they have to come to work even if they are sick?

Worker interview, cont.

- Ask more direct questions about the investigation
 - If you know or narrowed down the food vehicle, conduct a food preparation review with the worker. How was the food prepared from receipt of ingredients to storage to actual food preparation and service?
 - Did they wear gloves? Did they use utensils? Did they take food temperatures? Your questions may depend on the type of food suspected that you are investigating.
 - ~~– You may also learn about condition of equipment from the worker. Do certain coolers always break? Does the hot buffet line always hold temperature?~~

Worker interview, cont.

- With Noro (as well as many other pathogens), it is essential to determine whether any workers have been sick, particularly preceding the likely time of exposure
 - May need to interview as many workers as possible (and not just those that prepared the suspected food vehicle)
 - Include questions about illness of family members
 - Specifically probe for vomiting and diarrhea symptoms
 - Workers may fear retaliation if they report having come to work sick (particularly if that violates company policy)
 - Assure them of confidentiality
 - Clarify that sometimes workers may also become sick as part of outbreaks (rather than implying that workers are always the source, which may increase fear)
 - If workers with symptoms are identified, contact info may need to be collected to allow infectious disease office to do a comprehensive interview

Post-interview on-site observation

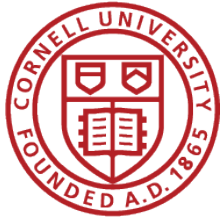
- This is where you'll learn if they're practicing what they're preaching
- You can ask the worker to prepare the suspected item in front of you
- Don't take notes right away. Sit back, relax, observe, and blend in. They may act very structured at the beginning, but after a while, they'll get used to you and start doing what they'd normally do if you weren't there.
- Observe the physical facility, food worker behavior, food handling practices, and food preparation and storage

Exit interview

- After interviewing the manager and workers, and making observations, sit down with the manager.
- Discuss your findings with the manager and make sure they understand why you were there.
- Give the manager any educational materials or resources you may have to stop and prevent this from occurring again.
- Give them your contact information for any further questions.

Overall Summary

- Interviews with managers and employees are a vital part of an environmental assessment as part of a Noro outbreak.
- Preparation and understanding of the complaint is important to the structure of your interview.
- Adapt to the setting and make the interviewees as comfortable as possible.
- Blend in and observe the behaviors of the employees.



Questions? Contact Martin Wiedmann:
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