

How food inspections work, why they matter and how you can get involved

By Clark Snyder

You might not think much about food safety when dining out, but food safety inspections are key to preventing foodborne illnesses. Each year, the registered sanitarians at RiverStone Health inspect over 1,000 food establishments in Yellowstone County to ensure food is prepared and served properly.

How do these inspections work, and why should you care?

Food safety inspections are designed to identify and eliminate the risk factors that lead to foodborne illnesses. These risk factors fall into five broad categories:

- **Poor personal hygiene:** Food workers who are ill or who do not wash their hands or use gloves properly can spread illness through the food they are serving.
- **Inadequate holding temperatures:** Keeping foods cold or hot can prevent harmful bacteria from growing. Inspectors make sure that each restaurant has proper facilities like walk-in coolers or steam tables to keep foods at the proper temperature.
- **Inadequate cooking:** Cooking is the only food preparation step that will kill bacteria. Inspectors make sure restaurants have guidelines in place to make sure that all foods are being cooked to the proper temperature.
- **Contaminated equipment:** If utensils and equipment are not cleaned frequently or properly, bacteria on the food residue can multiply. Inspectors make sure that proper cleaning procedures and equipment are in place.
- **Food from unsafe sources:** Any food served needs to be from an approved source, and inspectors make sure ingredients are approved by regulatory agencies like the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

During these inspections, the goal is not only to identify potential hazards but also to educate and provide resources to restaurant operators, helping them improve food safety practices.

How can we make inspection results more meaningful?

Food safety inspections are essential to protect our health when dining out, but the results aren't always easy to find. In many communities across the country, inspection results are shared publicly through newspapers, online platforms, or even posted directly in restaurants.

Studies show that when the public has access to these results, restaurants are more likely to comply with food safety standards, reducing the risk of foodborne illnesses and benefiting both consumers and restaurant owners.

What if the results of food safety inspections were more transparent in Yellowstone County? Could having easy access to this information help you choose restaurants that are safer and healthier to dine at?

To explore this idea, RiverStone Health is studying ways to make inspection reports more valuable to everyone involved. This includes finding better ways to share inspection results, so consumers can make more informed decisions; increasing accessibility; and recognizing restaurants that prioritize food safety.

Get involved: Share your opinion!

We want to hear from you about how we can improve the transparency of inspection results and make them more useful. You can participate in our study and voice your opinion by filling out the survey at the link below.

By making inspection results more meaningful and valuable, we empower consumers to make informed decisions while encouraging restaurants to maintain high food safety standards. Together, we can create a safer dining environment for all.

To fill out the survey, go to RiverStoneHealth.org/FoodSurvey. To see current restaurant inspections, go to RiverStoneHealth.org/Restaurants.

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