

Staying safe while sampling Billings' many mobile food options

By Jordan Machado

Food truck popularity continues to surge across Montana and Yellowstone County. With so many delicious and convenient options, it's easy to see why they're a hit.

A widespread misconception about food trucks is that they are unregulated. In reality, food trucks must follow the same health and safety standards as restaurants. They are required to have a valid license and undergo regular inspections. Though their smaller size presents unique challenges, food trucks must still have adequate storage, refrigeration and cooking equipment to safely prepare and serve their menu. Additionally, many food truck operators are trained and knowledgeable about food safety.

However, just like restaurants, some food trucks prioritize safety more than others. It's important to always remain vigilant about food safety when dining out. Foodborne illnesses can affect anyone and often result in missed work, canceled plans, and significant discomfort. In severe cases, foodborne illness can lead to long-term health problems or even death. So, how can you make sure your food truck experience is both delicious and safe?

Before you eat: Do your homework

- **Verify the license:** Ensure the food truck displays a valid license. A license indicates they are operating legally and have met health department standards. Food trucks operating without a license should be avoided.
- **Check inspection reports:** Before trying a new food truck, look up its inspection history online. RiverStone Health provides access to inspection reports at RiverStoneHealth.org/Restaurant. Frequent or serious violations could be a red flag.

While you order: Stay observant

- **Employee hygiene:** Many foodborne illnesses are spread by bacteria and viruses on dirty hands. Is there a handwashing station with access to soap and water? Watch for employees washing their hands frequently, especially after handling their phone, money or raw meat.
- **Food handling practices:** Watch how food is handled. Employees should use gloves or tongs for ready-to-eat foods like sandwiches and salads, avoiding direct contact with their bare hands. Ensure that gloves are changed between tasks and that employees wash their hands between glove changes to prevent cross-contamination.
- **Cleanliness:** Take a moment to assess the cleanliness of the food truck. Dirty surfaces and equipment can easily spread germs to your food. Look to see if counters, knives, and cutting boards are clean, and make sure raw meat juices are kept separate from other foods. Also, watch for pests like flies or ants, which can indicate unsanitary conditions.

- Ask questions: If you have concerns about food handling or cleanliness, ask the operator about their practices. Food operators are expected to have knowledge of food safety and should be able to address your questions confidently.

While you eat: Verify food temperature

- Temperature Control: Bacteria can multiply quickly if food isn't kept at the right temperatures. Make sure your BBQ chicken is served piping hot and your salad is chilled as if it's straight from the fridge. If the food feels lukewarm, it may have been kept at an unsafe temperature for too long, so it's best to avoid it.

By following these guidelines, you can safely enjoy the diverse offerings of Montana's food trucks while minimizing your risk of foodborne illness. If you suspect foodborne illness from a food truck, report it to help track outbreaks and protect others. In Yellowstone County, contact RiverStone Health at 406.256.2770.

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