



HIV/AIDS and the Food Handler

The Institute of Food Science & Technology, through its Public Affairs and Technical & Legislative Committees, has authorised the following Information Statement prepared by its Professional Food Microbiology Group. It was originally issued in June 1995, was reviewed and approved in January 1998, in September 2001, in March 2003 and in May 2008.

SUMMARY

Health authorities around the world all agree that transmission of HIV/AIDS via food and beverages is not a known risk. This situation needs to be made clear to all employers and employees in all branches of the food/drink industry and to the consuming public. It needs to be emphasised to persons with HIV/AIDS that they must comply with the other health and safety requirements applicable to all food handlers. They are more likely than others to acquire one of those diarrhoeal diseases that can be transmitted by food, and other infections or lesions. In this event, the food handlers should be managed according to the guidelines issued by the UK Department of Health.

THE PROBLEM

The disease AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is caused by a group of viruses called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). HIV damages the immune system making the patient more susceptible to secondary infections, especially diarrhoeal diseases, lung infections and cancers. Millions of people around the world are thought to be infected with the virus and the number is increasing rapidly. It is inevitable that some of these people will be food handlers.

The current statement (updated January 2001) by the US Centers for Disease Control confirms that there is no known risk of transmission of blood borne and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS during the preparation or serving of food or beverages. The statement on "HIV and Its Transmission" includes:

There is no known risk of HIV transmission to co-workers, clients, or consumers from contact in industries such as food-service establishments (see information on survival of HIV in the environment). Food-service workers known to be infected with HIV need not be restricted from work unless they have other infections or illnesses (such as diarrhoea or hepatitis A) for which any food-service worker, regardless of HIV infection status, should be restricted. CDC recommends that all food-service workers follow recommended standards and practices of good personal hygiene and food sanitation.

There have been no documented instances of transmission of HIV/AIDS in this manner. It is therefore important that the food industry, the consuming public and the media all understand that **transmission of HIV/AIDS by food and beverages is not a risk**. However, persons with HIV/AIDS are more likely than others to acquire one of those diarrhoeal diseases that can be

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transmitted by food, and other infections or lesions. In this event, the food handlers should be managed according to the guidelines issued by the UK Department of Health.

THE VIRUS AND THE MODE OF SPREAD

AIDS is caused by one or more of a group of retroviruses, which for simplicity have all been called Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Human beings should be regarded as the sole reservoir of the virus; neither foodstuffs, (including food animals), nor animals, nor pets, nor insects are a source. HIV is spread by sexual contact with infected persons, injection of contaminated blood or blood products and by transmission from mother to child. HIV cannot be spread by touching, coughing, sneezing or by insect bites. The virus has an incubation period of 5-8 years and so the progress of the disease varies from person to person; some people can unwittingly carry the virus without showing any symptoms, although it seems probable that all HIV carriers will develop AIDS eventually.

SURVIVAL OF THE VIRUS OUTSIDE THE HUMAN BODY

The virus dies only slowly at room temperature and it will survive well when frozen. However, it is very sensitive to heat and it is rapidly destroyed at 55 degrees Celsius and above. It is readily inactivated at both low and high pH. The HIV virus is rapidly destroyed by the commonly used concentrations of all biocides, including hypochlorite, ethyl alcohol and isopropyl alcohol. When accidents occur, the precautions used to prevent the spread of viral hepatitis and other blood borne infections will also prevent the spread of HIV. First aiders should cover any exposed cuts or abrasions on their own hands with a waterproof dressing, put on disposable plastic gloves and an apron. Spillages of blood and other body fluids should be flooded with a biocide and mopped up with paper towels. All these disposable items should be placed in plastic bags and safely disposed of, preferably by incineration.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FOOD INDUSTRY

Food handlers who carry HIV are not a threat to their workmates or to the products that they handle. They should not be restricted from working with foods or beverages or be restricted from using telephones, machinery, office equipment, toilets, showers, eating facilities or drinking fountains. They may thus work normally, unless of course they develop a secondary infection such as a diarrhoeal disease, which will preclude them from handling food. In that event, the employee and the employer should follow the guidelines published by the UK Department of Health: "Food Handlers: Fitness to Work" (1995).

REFERENCES

UK Dept of Health (1995) "Food Handlers: Fitness to Work"

UK Dept of Health (1995) "Food Handlers: Fitness to Work: Guidance for Food Business Managers"

US Centers for Disease Control, Divisions of HIV/AIDS Prevention (2001) "HIV and Its Transmission" <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/facts/transmission.htm>

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US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service,
Food and Drug Administration, 2001 Food Code, Chapter 2, Management and Personnel.
<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fc01-2.html>

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- Benefit the public supply of safe, wholesome, nutritious, tasty and attractive food through the application of sound science and technology;
- Improve public knowledge and awareness of important issues relating to the supply, production, safety and quality of food;
- Develop and communicate the knowledge underlying food science and technology, and further the education of food scientists and technologists;
- Safeguard the public by defining, promoting, and upholding professional standards of competence, integrity and ethical behaviour; and
- Maintain these standards by encouraging members to continue their professional education and development throughout their careers.

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