

# Health and Safety in the care catering environment



Chris Jackson, the national chair of NASHICS (National Association for Safety and Health in Care Services) shares some sound advice – ‘Think proactive, not reactive!’

When considering how to manage risk in the catering environment, care providers often focus on food safety and food hygiene issues. These issues are, of course, crucial to the safe operation of the service, however, it is important for care providers to also be mindful of the wider health and safety risks that can arise in the kitchen environment and to implement effective procedures to minimise the risk of accidents, injuries and ill health occurring.

## WHY IS HEALTH AND SAFETY SO IMPORTANT IN A KITCHEN?

Individual care homes and providers do exhibit their own patterns of risk, but the main causes of accidents and ill health in the catering sector are:

- ▶ *slips, trips and falls*
- ▶ *lifting and manual handling*
- ▶ *contact with hot surfaces, liquids, steam and harmful substances/chemicals*
- ▶ *cuts from knives or sharp objects and items*
- ▶ *dermatitis*
- ▶ *upper limb disorders.*

## CASE LAW EXAMPLE (NOT SOCIAL CARE BUT STILL CONSIDER THE PARALLELS)

This prosecution case demonstrates the injuries that can occur when risks in the kitchen are not appropriately managed. The case involved an accident in a fast-food outlet where a 16-year-old employee slips on water leaking from an ice-making machine. She puts her hand into the hot oil of a deep fat fryer when reaching out to break her fall and suffers severe burns to her hand and forearm.

There were a number of contributing factors to the accident. In particular, during busy times spillages would often be covered with cardboard rather than mopped up, and although attempts had been made to get the leaking ice machine fixed, no individual had been assigned responsibility for ensuring faulty equipment was repaired. There were also issues on the day with staffing, which meant the team leader was working in the restaurant and so unable to properly monitor workplace safety. The employer was fined £15,000 following a prosecution by the local authority.

This scenario demonstrates both how easily accidents can occur, and the way in which additional hazards in the kitchen environment can escalate the potential consequences of a workplace accident.

## STEPS TO BE TAKEN BY CARE PROVIDERS

Common issues that can increase the likelihood of accidents occurring include a failure to properly assess the risks of the kitchen environment, poor communication, and a lack of allocated responsibility for ensuring health and safety policies in kitchen and service are implemented.

Providers should examine the activities being carried out by their teams in the kitchen, assess which of the risks are significant, and make effective arrangements to control these risks. Employees should also be given appropriate training on any relevant procedures. This ensures they understand that operating in a safe environment must take priority over taking shortcuts or hurrying to get the food out to residents, or any other similar pressures.

Care providers should also keep these arrangements under review, to ensure that they remain appropriate. This is particularly important if there are any changes that could have an effect on the implementation of the health and safety policies already in place. This could be, for example, the purchase of new cooking equipment or the departure of a key member of staff, as care providers often experience a particularly high turnover of catering staff and engage agency staff.

## EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF HEALTH AND SAFETY CAN BEST BE ACHIEVED BY

- ▶ *realising it is an integral and essential part of care providers' management responsibility*
- ▶ *identifying the main risk areas and taking action on those whilst disregarding trivial risks*
- ▶ *setting clear targets, for example to train staff and clearly allocate responsibilities*
- ▶ *supervising adequately and consulting staff, at all stages everyone must be involved*
- ▶ *making compatible with home-wide procedures, such as gas, electrical and fire safety*



### FOCUS ON DERMATITIS

There are some simple straightforward steps that providers can take to help reduce the risk of dermatitis occurring:

- ▶ *conduct a review of chemicals and substances used within the kitchen and look at substituting any irritant or hazardous substances for less harmful alternatives, where possible*
- ▶ *ensure that any potentially hazardous substances used in the kitchen are stored safely and labelled correctly*
- ▶ *where risks have been identified, implement appropriate control measures, such as providing staff with appropriate PPE, to ensure that exposure is limited, and providing pre- and after-work barrier creams/moisturisers with effective handwashing*
- ▶ *provide appropriate training and promote safe working practices, with simple reminders and posters around the kitchen raising awareness of dermatitis and the measures staff can use to protect themselves, looking out for indicators*
- ▶ *encourage employees to raise any concerns and seek medical advice without delay if their skin begins to be red, dry or itchy, as this can develop into flaking, swelling, cracks and blisters*

### FOCUS ON KNIVES

It is crucial that staff are trained in the safe use of knives and additionally, if appropriate, safe working practices when sharpening them. This includes being made aware of the different types of knives available and which is most appropriate for each task.

Basic training includes emphasising that a knife should be carried with the blade pointing downwards and that care should be given when washing up the object.

It is also important to be aware of behaviour that may increase the risk of injury to employees. The risk of an accident with a knife can be increased by factors such as horseplay, ignorance as to how to behave with a knife, using the incorrect type of knife for a particular job, and failing to cut on a stable surface. It is also important that knives must not be used inappropriately (for example, to open a can, packaging or letter).

Things to consider when ensuring that a safe working environment is in place include looking at the floor surfaces and making sure work surfaces are kept clean, are clear from clutter and spillages, and are at a comfortable height. Employees should have adequate working space and lighting for the tasks they are carrying out.

Care providers should also ensure that knives are stored safely, taking into account any additional risk factors created by the care setting.



### FOCUS ON SLIPS AND TRIPS

Some straightforward things you might consider are:

- ▶ **Food spillages:** Spills from food or cooking are among the main causes of slips in kitchens. Staff must be vigilant and clean up any spilled substance that could cause a hazard.
- ▶ **Water overflow or leak:** An overflowing sink or a leak that causes water to drip onto the floor can create a serious slip hazard, especially on a smooth floor. Stop it from getting onto the floor in the first place. Turn off taps and fix leaks quickly – use drip trays or something similar as a temporary measure.
- ▶ **Floor in poor condition:** It's easy to trip on damaged floors, so if you spot an area of damage, arrange for it to be fixed straight away – don't put off repairs. As a temporary measure, highlight the damaged area, report it, and where possible, keep people away.
- ▶ **Trip hazards:** An unexpected obstacle in your path can cause a serious trip and fall. People need a clear space in which to work, so make sure boxes, bags, cables and other obstacles aren't left lying around. Storage should always be provided for incoming deliveries and staff belongings.
- ▶ **Cleaning:** Most slips happen on wet or dirty floors. Anything that gets onto the floor needs to be removed quickly and effectively. Ensure cleaning happens at the right time and is carried out in the correct manner, using the right products and equipment for the job.

### OVERALL FINAL POINT

Following these approaches should minimise the risk of accidents occurring. If an accident does occur, it is important that this is reported when required, and that the circumstances are reviewed to establish whether any changes to the systems in place are required, such as additional training for staff, purchasing new equipment, or updating cleaning regimes.



### FURTHER INFORMATION AND MORE KEY TOPICS

- ▶ [www.hse.gov.uk/catering/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/catering/index.htm)
- ▶ **Dermatitis:** [www.hse.gov.uk/catering/dermatitis.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/catering/dermatitis.htm)
- ▶ **Knives:** [www.hse.gov.uk/catering/knives.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/catering/knives.htm)
- ▶ **Slips and trips:** [www.hse.gov.uk/catering/slips.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/catering/slips.htm)