Keeping food safe with a fully integrated skin care system

Figures from the Food Standard Agency estimate that foodborne illnesses affect up to 5.5 million people in the UK a year. Commonly known as food poisoning, foodborne illnesses can be triggered by various factors, for example bacteria present in food due to undercooked meat or food which has been left unrefrigerated for a long period of time.

by Paul Jakeway,
Marketing Director, Deb.
www.debgroup.com/uk

Cross-contamination can also be a cause of food poisoning and occurs when bacteria and viruses transfer onto food from a contaminated surface, equipment, other food and people – usually via their hands.

Understanding the threat

Two types of bacteria which present a risk are campylobacter and listeria.

Campylobacter is considered to be responsible for more than 280,000 cases of food poisoning each year. Estimates by the Food Standards Agency have indicated that campylobacter causes more than 100 deaths a year, costing the UK economy about £900 million. Listeria causes a disease called listeriosis and whilst it is rare, it can be equally as dangerous.

About four in five cases of campylobacter poisoning in the UK come from contaminated poultry, but the pathogen is also found in red meat, unpasteurised milk, and untreated water. It spreads very easily and has a low infective dose, which means that only a small amount of bacteria in a piece of food can be enough to cause illness.

Listeria is most commonly found in unpasteurised milk and dairy products made from unpasteurised milk. While many bacteria generally infect specific locations within the human body, listeria may infect many different sites, such as the brain, spinal cord membranes, or the bloodstream. Listeria can survive in low temperatures, which means it can grow to potentially harmful levels in food stored in a fridge.

Listeriosis can also lead to meningitis or encephalitis (brain infection). People at an increased risk of developing listeriosis include those over 65 years of age, pregnant women and their unborn babies, and babies less than one month old.

To avoid the threat of foodborne illnesses, cross-contamination needs to be avoided at all cost.

Controlling the risks

Strict regulations are in place to assure this: under the Food Hygiene Regulation 2006 and The Food Hygiene Regulations Great Britain 2006 all 'food handlers' are required to be supervised, instructed, and trained in food hygiene practices. It also states that they should observe good personal hygiene and routinely wash their hands when handling food. Companies also need to adhere to a Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system.

The system identifies hazards in the workplace, such as moments when cross-contamination could occur, and calculates the likely incident rate. Such a system helps food manufacturers look at how they handle food and introduces procedures to make sure the food produced is safe to eat.

Importance of compliance

Effective hand hygiene is widely seen as one of the most effective ways to prevent the cross-contamination of food.

Employees in food-handling environments need to frequently decontaminate their hands – not just before and after contact with food, but before and after breaks, and at key moments such as after using the washroom, coughing, sneezing or touching contaminated surfaces.

And yet research demonstrates that hand hygiene compliance is not always where it needs to be. Some estimates show that 39% of food-handling staff do not wash their hands after visiting the toilet, while 53% do not wash their hands before preparing food. This lack of compliance will have an impact on swab test failure rates and can significantly raise the risk of cross-contamination.

What can the food manufacturing sector do to change the situation? Once a HACCP system has been effectively implemented, it should be used to develop a fully integrated skin care programme – a four step system that assures hand hygiene compliance, while also taking into account the skin health of employees.

Four steps to handling food safely

A specialist skin care programme identifies four crucial steps for hand hygiene in food-handling environments: applying protective creams (where appropriate) before work; using hand cleansers after hands become contaminated; sanitising hands in situations where the skin is visibly clean, but potentially contaminated; and applying restorative creams at the end of the working day.

Protective creams can reduce direct contact with specific physical contaminants, help retain natural lipids and moisture in the skin, and make the skin easier to clean. Some manufacturers have created products specifically formulated for the food industry: they protect hands in wet-working conditions, improve comfort and skin strength when wearing gloves, and provide an additional barrier for skin that is exposed to refrigeration environments.

Cleansers are essential to remove dirt and contaminants from the skin during the work day, especially after breaks and visits to the toilet. Antibacterial hand wash products are

Continued on page 8

Continued from page 7
a good choice for hygiene sensitive food-handling environments. Foam-based products are easier to rinse than traditional liquid or lotion soaps, making them especially suitable for environments where hands are being washed frequently.

Sanitisers, meanwhile, should be used in addition to hand washing before entering locations such as food production areas, where a higher level of sanitisation is required. Sanitisers kill germs and bacteria when hands are visibly clean, but could be contaminated, and are therefore recommended after coughing, sneezing, or touching surfaces that are likely to be contaminated.

Advanced cleansers and sanitisers are now capable of killing 99.999% of transient bacteria. This rate of effectiveness is known as Log 5 reduction. Products that meet Log 5 requirements are 100 times more effective than the more common Log 3 products, which kill 99.9% of transient bacteria.

Some sanitisers have also advanced to be fully virucidal. Combining a highly effective broad spectrum biocidal efficacy with safety and user preference, they meet the highest levels of European microbiological standards.

When choosing antibacterial hand wash and sanitisers it is important to look for products whose formulas have been independently tested and assessed by experts to demonstrate that the products are non-tainting and do not influence the quality and safety of food products.

Restorative products are important too. Applied at the end of the working day, they moisturise, nourish and condition the skin, improving its strength and preventing it from becoming dry or damaged.

Why use a specialist skin care company?

Any products should always be sourced from a reputable company who offers skin care and hand hygiene advice, guidance and technical support.

A skin care specialist should provide site audits, an essential service conducted to help employers and employees understand the work place facilities, working environments, workflow, hazards and hand hygiene requirements. From this, recommendations on the right products for the right places can be made to establish best practice. Regular on-going audits ensure that the system implemented continues to be effective.

The installation of specifically designed dispensers for use with hygienically-sealed cartridge cleansers, sanitisers, and creams is strongly advised. Such systems provide the most hygienic skin care, by reducing to a minimum the risk of cross-infection that can occur if a number of people extract the product from open 'bulk fill' dispensers.

Companies should also look for BioCote marked dispensers. BioCote is a market leading antimicrobial technology that is proven to effectively reduce bacteria, mould and fungi on the surface of the equipment. The presence of BioCote's logo on dispensers reassures employees and customers that excellence in hand hygiene procedures is of paramount importance.

Training is key to compliance

For a skin care programme to be effective, education is crucial. Skin care experts can provide training programmes and materials such as videos, leaflets, brochures, and posters. They can also provide information boards and skin hygiene centres made from a special material which does not harbour microbes. Staff meetings are a good way to keep skin care on everyone's mind on a day-to-day basis.

By implementing a fully integrated skin care system, food manufacturers can do more than comply with food hygiene restrictions: if they take a 'hands on' rather than a reactive approach, they can address the threat of cross-contamination and hazards to the skin of employees jointly – making sure food remains safe, and hands healthy. ■