

The Desktop Dining Exposure

Written by: CPT Allison Sweet, MS, RD, LD
Chief, Nutrition Education
GLWACH Nutrition Care Division
(573) 596-0131 x 69659

Historically, the amount of time Americans spend working has increased over the years, with the majority now exceeding 40 hours a week. Few would argue that the pace of work-activities has likewise increased. To maximize efficiency, workers may be tempted to consume meals ‘on-the-go’ at their desk or work station. In fact, a recent survey by Home Food Safety™ found that 83 percent of Americans are doing just that. Although it likely provides benefits in terms of enhanced time management, the practice of “desktop dining” may increase your risk for a food-related illness.

Most food-borne illnesses are caused by eating foods contaminated with viruses or bacteria. According to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control), each year 1 in 6 Americans, or roughly 48 million people will experience a day or two of nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea as a result of eating contaminated foods. Fortunately, for the majority of these 48 million cases, the symptoms are mild, and self-limiting; within a day or two recovery is evident, if not complete. While it is less common, food-borne illnesses can be so severe that they require medical intervention. In fact, 128,000 people are admitted to hospitals each year and another 3000 die from food-related illness.

By following these five simple guidelines you can greatly reduce your risk of contracting a food-borne illness.

Helping Hands

According to the Soap and Detergent Association (SDA), only 35 percent of Americans wash their hands regularly before lunch. To help prevent the spread of germs, wash your hands with warm, soapy water for 20 seconds (or sing the ABCs) before you start your meal. If you can’t wash your hands, use a hand sanitizer.

Do a Little Housekeeping

Clean the surfaces on your desk (which includes your desktop, keyboard, mouse, etc.) at least once a week to minimize germs. A study conducted by the University of Arizona discovered that the average office desk contains 100 times more germs than a kitchen table. To reduce your risk of food-borne illness, clean your desk before and after you prepare or eat food in your office.

Scrub the Plates

Wash your office coffee mug, water bottle, and lunch box every day with warm soapy water. Bacteria that cause food-borne illness can grow on tiny bits of food or saliva, contaminating food or beverages consumed the next day.

Keep it Cold

Perishable food items, such as sandwiches and leftovers, need to be refrigerated within 2 hours of preparation. If removed from the refrigerator, they should not be exposed to room temperature for more than 2 hours. Many types of bacteria grow in foods as they approach room temperature. In order to help keep your food cold, pack your lunch with icepacks or store it in the office refrigerator.

Put a Label on it

If you plan to keep condiments or snacks in the office refrigerator, write the date on it. Most home made snacks and leftovers expire in 2-5 days. Throw away any expired or questionable foods.

The next time you dine at your desk, enjoy a safe and healthy lunch by following these quick and easy guidelines.