

Food Safety Requirements for Food-Related Enhancements:

North Carolina Sanitation Requirements for Long-term Care Facilities

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One of the challenges in adopting food-related enhancements to improve the quality of life for residents is maintaining compliance with food safety and sanitation standards. The kitchen and dining areas of long-term care facilities are subject to the same sanitation rules as restaurants and the rest of the facility must meet the sanitation requirements for institutions. This article addresses some of the more common issues encountered by the Division of Environmental Health.

Cookouts

The restaurant standards prohibit institution kitchens from cooking food outdoors for ordinary food service operations, but do allow the kitchen to cater food to residents and staff at planned events from which the public is excluded. Those planned events outside of the ordinary food service can include cookouts if outdoor cooking is a part of the activity. All food preparation must take place in the central kitchen and be catered to the event ready for use. If food is put together, portioned or served outside of the central kitchen, there must be a serving area with provisions for handwashing and keeping food hot or cold. Activity kitchens can be used as a serving area if a separate hand sink is provided.

Picnics

Food for picnics for 12 or less people can be prepared in activity kitchens, but for larger groups must be prepared in the central kitchen. Food must be in a ready-to-eat form in individually wrapped portions and provisions must be made to assure the food is kept hot (>140°) or cold (<45°). Hot food holding units must meet commercial food service requirements. Cold foods may be held in coolers with enough ice to keep the food below 45°F

Food from Outside the Facility

All food served at a facility must be prepared in a kitchen under inspection by the health department or be received ready-to-eat from a commercial food processor. The serving of home-cooked food, such as a pot-luck dinner, is prohibited. Food brought in by visitors of an individual resident and personal food of employees must be stored separately from the facility's food supply and identified so it will not be served to any other person. Exceptions are generally made for some low water activity baked goods such as cookies and birthday cakes to be shared among residents.

Family-style Food Service

While the rules do allow family-style food service, it is inadvisable because older populations have an increased risk from food-related illness and vary in their personal hygiene practices. Unless it can be assured the participants wash their hands before meals and handle food properly, contamination can be a problem.

Food Selection

Providing a greater variety of foods can enhance the dining experience, but there are some foods which are inappropriate for populations at risk from weakened immunity including elderly populations. Foods to avoid include partially cooked eggs, undercooked hamburger, raw seed sprouts, un-pasteurized juices and raw shellfish. All raw meats must be thoroughly cooked to recommended temperatures (chicken 165°F, hamburger 155°F, pork 150°F). Ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs should be thoroughly heated to 140°F before serving. Cooking temperatures should always be measured using an accurate food thermometer. All whole fruits and vegetables must be thoroughly washed before preparation.

Nutrition Stations and Snack Carts

Any area where food is prepared, put together or portioned must be provided with the necessary equipment, including hot and cold food holding equipment and a separate handwashing sink. Snack carts can be used to deliver food prepared in the central kitchen. Generally food must be packaged in ready-to-eat portions at the preparation site before being delivered to residents. Some latitude is generally given for soup kettles and bread machines filled in the central kitchen to be moved to patient care areas where the aroma can stimulate appetites. Snack trays with individual bite-sized snacks from the kitchen or nutrition station can be placed in convenient locations if they are protected from contamination by staff monitoring, covering or individually wrapping the snacks. The rules require hot or cold potentially hazardous foods removed from a controlled temperature to be eaten or discarded within two hours.

Food-related enhancements can improve the eating experience for residents of long-term care facilities. Adding enhancements while meeting the food safety requirements can be challenging, but with proper planning can become a pleasant departure from routine meal service.