

Food Safety at Farmers Markets

By Colleen Donovan and Karen Kinney

The primary goal of food safety is to minimize the risk of people getting sick from what they eat. The risk is not just to the person who falls ill – there are risks to vendors and the market too. Simply being accused of making someone sick can be an expensive experience and jeopardize the reputation of the entire market. Furthermore, this type of negative publicity has the potential of spreading to “farmers markets” in general in the public’s mind -- independent of what really happened or didn’t happen. Consequently, food safety is something every farm, food vendor, and farmers market must address in today’s world.

As we have seen in recent years, the media is ripe for stories questioning food safety at farmers markets. In 2012, a Tulsa, OK news program produced three stories: “Farmers Markets: Is the food safe to eat?”, a video “Farmers Markets: Pick with Care,” and “Tips on what you should look for when purchasing food at a Farmers Market” (July 2012). They even created a graphic on “Farmers Markets: What to look for when you’re shopping.”

The very young, older people, women who are pregnant, and anyone who is immune compromised due to illness or treatments like chemotherapy are at greatest risk for getting seriously ill from eating contaminated foods. Keep in mind, the person who eats the food may not be the one actually doing the shopping at your market.



Source: www.kjrh.com/generic/news/Farmers-Markets (Accessed in July 2012).

One proactive approach is to tell shoppers about how farmers markets and vendors value food safety and are working hard to abide by food safety practices. The goal is to build shoppers’ confidence in the quality and integrity of their vendors and market before there is an incident. Avoiding any perceptions that could jeopardize the level of trust that shoppers have in our “farmers market brand” is also vitally important. You

may even consider developing a “food safety plan” for your farmers market. The good news is that simple steps can make a big difference in reducing risk.



Be diligent about checking your vendors’ food safety practices at the market and working with your local health department to ensure the market and vendors are in compliance. This is an important step in maintaining the integrity of the market, its reputation and shoppers’ trust in the food quality.

Use food safety as a marketing tool for vendors and the market

And, at its best, having established standards for food safety can be used as a marketing tool. Clean, safe displays and practices show shoppers that you care about their well-being. Your market may want to put up signage telling shoppers about your commitment to food safety or advertising your hand washing stations, and good signage about the importance of washing your hands, and any other basic food safety practices that you are already doing.

Food Safety Basics

What do we actually need to do when we talk about “food safety” at our farmers markets?

1. Maintain and monitor temperatures

The temperature of foods is key to food safety because bacteria grow faster when they are in the “danger zone,” either too warm or too cool. This means they need to be kept at certain temperatures not just at the market, but also while foods are being transported and stored.

- Make sure your market has a working thermometer on hand.
- Consider asking or requiring your vendors to have a thermometer on hand if they are required to keep products at certain temperatures.
- What are your market policies for monitoring temperatures at vendor booths?
- Know your county health department requirements or who you can call with questions.



Keeping foods at the proper temperature maintains the quality of products too which is important for sales.

2. Avoid cross-contamination

Cross contamination is when food becomes contaminated by bacteria from another source, such as people’s hands, soil, water, or even other food. Cross-contamination may also come from a bag, box, counter or any other surface.

- It is especially important to keep raw meat separate from ready to eat or fresh produce.

- If you or your shoppers reuse bags, ensure that they are clean and haven't had any raw meat in them.
- Encourage vendors to bring supplies with them to the market so they can wash and sanitize surfaces, displays, etc. in real time.

3. Maintain good personal hygiene

Everyone involved in the market -- staff, vendors and anyone representing the farmers market – should have good personal hygiene. Farmers markets can be messy with all the shaking hands, handling of money, loading and unloading, ripe products, and open public spaces.

- Encourage staff and vendors to wash their hands often, and make it as easy as possible to do so.
- Encourage vendors to use gloves, deli paper, tongs or even a bag to protect the product and convey good sanitation to customers. If they are sampling, they will be required to do so.
- Discourage vendors from eating at the booth in front of shoppers.
- Also, if the market staff or vendors seem sick (vomiting, diarrhea and jaundice), figure out a way to send the person home or separate from shoppers and product.

4. Sampling

Sampling can be a great way to help increase vendor sales. It is also regulated by the local health jurisdiction. The challenging part for vendors is that each county has a tendency to do things differently. Some counties require permits for sampling, some require getting a formal exemption to the permit, and some don't have any required permits. However, they all expect vendors to follow their rules and will inspect markets. Please consult with the local health jurisdiction where the market is located for specific sampling policies.

- Encourage vendors to only put out small amounts.
- Disposable, single-use utensils are required. Make sure vendor has a garbage can nearby to reduce litter.
- Food should not be left out for more than 2 hours.
- Vendors should have clean water to wash equipment.
- Perhaps most importantly, maintain a handwashing station in accordance with the health department rules.

5. Labeling, ingredient lists, and packaging

Many processed and value-added foods have very specific labeling requirements. Please see the WSDA's "Handbook for Small and Direct Marketing Farms: Regulations and Strategies for Farm and Food Businesses" (available online) for details by product. In terms of food safety, the keys are being able to trace where the product came from (sometimes down the field), spelling out "safe handling instructions," and any having clear expiration dates.

- ❑ It is also important to have ingredient lists for prepared foods available due to concerns over potential food allergies.
- ❑ Packaging for any product should be clean, visually appealing, and food grade quality, if possible.
- ❑ Produce boxes should always be clean and neatly stacked, if possible.

6. Equipment

Getting set up for food safety usually requires investing in equipment such as thermometers, sampling trays, ice chests or refrigeration of some sort, and of course, mobile cooking equipment for prepared foods. These items don't have to be expensive. Talk to other vendors and food safety inspectors to find out what brands are best.

Farmers Market Training Materials

The **Farmers Market Federation of New York** has developed an incredibly comprehensive, online “Food Safety” toolkit for farmers markets (<http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/food-safety/>). It includes:

- Protocols including “Food Safety Recommendations for Farmers Markets” (<http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/protocols/>) and “Guidelines for Crisis Communications” (<http://nyfarmersmarket.com/wp-content/uploads/Crisis-communication-guidelines.pdf>)
- A 6-part “Food Safety Training Curriculum” for farmers markets with loads of templates and resources <http://www.nyfarmersmarket.com/training-curriculum/>

In addition, the **Oregon Department of Agriculture** has developed information and guidelines on “Food Safety at Farmers Markets.” It is available at <http://www.oregon.gov/ODA/shared/Documents/Publications/FoodSafety/FarmersMarketsFoodSafety.pdf>

Of course, food safety experts furrow their brow upon seeing dogs in farmers markets. If a market does allow dogs, consider having signage to encourage short leashes (to reduce tripping hazards); be prepared to help shoppers clean up messes; and train vendors to keep food away from wet noses.

Washington State Resources

Washington State Department of Agriculture: <http://agr.wa.gov/>

For food safety questions and compliance, please visit WSDA's Food Safety Program online or call (360) 902-1876. The “Farm Wisdom: Managing Risk on Small Farms Video Series” includes food safety topics and is available in both English and Spanish

(<http://agr.wa.gov/Marketing/SmallFarm/managerisk.aspx>). The WSDA “Food Assistance and Regional Markets Program” staff can be reached at (206) 256-6157.

The WSDA’s “[Small Farm and Direct Marketing Handbook: Regulations and Strategies for Farm Businesses in Washington State](#)” is another relevant resource. Also known as “The Green Book,” the handbook is available online and details state regulations by product. Please visit: <http://agr.wa.gov/marketing/smallfarm>.

Washington State University

Karen Killinger is an Associate Professor and Extension Food Safety Specialist at WSU. Karen has done presentations on food safety at past WSFMA conferences and regularly provides training around the state. She can be reached at karen_killinger@wsu.edu. Also see www.foodsafety.wsu.edu

County Health Departments

The Washington State Department of Health works in partnership with the food service industry and local, state, and federal agencies, and in particular local health departments. Chapter 246-215 WAC, [The Food Code](#), provides the safety standards for food served or sold to the public in Washington State: www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/Food/FoodWorkerandIndustry/FoodSafetyRules.aspx.

Local health jurisdictions adopt the Food Code as the basis of the requirements for preparation through food service operations such as restaurants, grocery stores, catering firms, food trucks and farmers markets. In this way, county health inspectors are charged with enforcing local, state and federal laws. The local health department may issue the following types of permits to vendors:

- Seasonal itinerant permit
- Farmers market food permit
- Multiple temporary even permit
- Extended temporary event
- Annual itinerant permit.

Some of the larger counties have webpages dedicated to food safety at farmers markets:

- **Clark County Public Health** has a “Selling Food FAQ” <https://www.clark.wa.gov/public-health/selling-food>
- **Seattle & King County Public Health** has a “Farmers Market plan guide and food service permit application” <http://www.kingcounty.gov/healthservices/health/ehs/foodsafety/FoodBusiness/farmers.aspx>
- **Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department** has a web page dedicated to farmers markets. <http://www.tpchd.org/food/farmers-markets/>

GAPS and FSMA

Good Agricultural Practices - GAPs

In discussing food safety, you may have heard farmers talk about GAPs. This stands for Good Agricultural Practices which primarily relate to on farm and post-handling practices. There is also GHP which stands for Good Handling Practices. This has more to do with practices in the marketplace. The USDA has developed a GAP/GHP Audit Verification Program. Currently, these are both *voluntary* programs. Washington State Department of Agriculture staff are certified to do these audits. Some larger retailers, wholesale buyers and institutions are requiring GAP/GHP certification; however, it is not currently mandatory.

The standardized components of GAP/GHP and any farm's food safety plan typically focus on water quality, manure and biosolids, worker health and hygiene, field/packing sanitation, transportation and distribution, packaging and recordkeeping. More specifically, audits are designed to demonstrate that the participating company has adhered to Food and Drug Administration's "[Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables](#)." A successful audit shows commitment by management and employees to follow and maintain the guidelines to help minimize the potential risk for microbial contamination of the product.

As you can imagine, farmers tend not to welcome additional requirements and record-keeping. The GAP/GHP standards, developed for larger-scale farms, can be especially hard to translate on small-scale, diversified farms. In response, the WSDA has a Bridging the GAPs project to show how small, diversified farms can meet federal criteria. More information is available at WSDA's website dedicated to GAPs called "Bridging the GAPs": agr.wa.gov/inspection/GAPGHP/.

Food Safety Modernization Act - FSMA

The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act is new legislation that was signed into law in 2011. Unlike the voluntary GAPs or GHPs, FSMA regulations will be required. After going through an extensive comment period and rule making process, the final rules were released in 2015 and are currently being phased in. There are seven primary rules, the two that are the most important for farmers market vendors are the "Produce Safety Rule" (for farms) and "Preventive Controls for Human Food" (for food facilities that manufacture, process, pack or hold food for human consumption). There are specific definitions, exclusions, and some exemptions for small businesses. For more information, contact:

Farmers Market Coalition <https://farmersmarketcoalition.org/advocacy/fsma/>

FDA www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/FSMA/default.htm

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition <http://sustainableagriculture.net/fsma/>

WSDA http://agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/FSMA/FSMA_food.aspx