

## **BACK TO THE BASICS-**

### **Simple Steps to Take to Avoid Accidents on your Premises**

I walked into a restaurant a few months ago, and as I was sitting there eating my lunch, I watched as the overhead air conditioning unit leaked water on the floor. As the puddle increased in size, I waited for an employee to mop it up and/or warn its patrons with a “wet floor” sign. Neither was done. I informed my waitress, and she advised that they were aware of the problem, but had not yet had a chance to clean the wet floor. A few minutes later I saw the manager come out with a mop and “wet floor” sign.

I am amazed at times at the little things that restaurants fail to do to keep their patrons safe from injury, and at the same time, avoid liability. All restaurants should have in place policies and procedures governing all aspects of their operation. However, it seems that some restaurants get lackadaisical in knowing and enforcing them. Cleaning up spills and warning customers about a wet floor is so basic~ yet at times we all need gentle reminders about going back to some of the basics.

Wet Floors: Many restaurants are faced with lawsuits resulting from a patron who slipped and fell on a wet floor. A simple warning with a “wet floor” sign may be all that the restaurant needs to protect itself from liability. Wet floors can be reported by any member of the staff, and in fact, all members of the staff should be on the lookout throughout their shifts:

- 1) The host staff should examine the floor before and/or after seating a customer;
- 2) The wait staff should keep an eye out for any wet floors as they walk between tables and the kitchen, and immediately report and clean up any spills they create.
- 3) The bus staff should examine the floor as they go from table to table.
- 4) Finally, the managerial staff should examine the floor as they routinely walk the floors to check on their guests and the condition of the restaurant.

With the entire staff on the lookout for any spills, leaks or food making the floors slippery, someone will likely find it. Once it is reported (by an employee or a guest), the restaurant must promptly warn customers of the slippery floor by placing a “wet floor” sign in the area, and then clean the floor.

Restrooms: The same logic applies in restrooms. Restrooms must be regularly monitored, maintained and cleaned, and anytime the floor is wet or slippery, a “wet floor” sign should be strategically placed to warn customers.

Uneven floors: Along the same lines, if your restaurant has an elevated floor and patrons are required to take a step up or down to get to their seats, you may want to consider having the host warn each guest to “watch your step” in addition to a written warning or a handrail.

Lighting: Dark areas in restaurants can at times be dangerous. Check both your interior and exterior lights regularly to ensure they are working properly, and replace burned out and broken lights immediately.

Illnesses: It seems basic, but employees, including management staff, should not report to work if they are sick. The risk of infecting your guests is too great. Remind your employees about your policy on returning to work after an illness, and the importance of thoroughly washing their hands after using the restroom. **And enforce those policies.**

Outbreaks of illness at restaurants have made headlines across the country and hurt business ~ no one wants to eat at the restaurant that gave everyone a virus. You do not want a sick employee sneezing on food, nor do you want an employee with a rash all over his body handling food. Use common sense to help keep your restaurant out of the Sunday morning headlines.

Allergies: With 7 – 12 million Americans suffering from a variety of food allergies, it is no wonder there are headlines across the nation of people who have died while dining at a restaurant. These stories are tragic and often preventable. Knowledge about allergies by the restaurant staff is key~ for example, do your employees understand that simply scraping the nuts off the top of dish does not remove the allergen? The very fact that the nuts touched the dish could be enough to kill an extremely allergic guest.

When you are dealing with a patron who suffers from a food allergy, you must exercise extreme caution. It is important that you have policies and procedures dealing with allergy-related questions. For instance, maybe your policy requires all inquiries related to allergies be directed to the general manager, kitchen manager, or the most senior manager on duty, and never answered by the host or wait staff. Each manager authorized to field allergen questions must be well-informed on all of the ingredients of every item on the menu, including products used to cook the food. So if a mother with a child who has severe milk allergies asks if the chicken tender and french fry kid meal contains milk, if there is any concern whatsoever by the manager that the meal contains, or may contain, any milk or milk product, or cooked in any product containing milk, the manager should tell the mother the meal may contain milk and either recommend an alternate allergy-free meal, or apologize that the restaurant is unable to make an allergy-free meal. You are better off sending the customer away then risking severe illness or death.

If the item is definitely allergy-free, then the next step is following the food to ensure that it is not cross-contaminated with another food item that is not allergy free. Cross-contamination can come from utensils and cooking surfaces that have not been completely cleaned, so allergy-free items must be color-coded or otherwise marked to ensure that it is carefully followed and not subject to any cross-contamination.

*Remember:* if you cannot guarantee the item will be allergy-free, then send the customer on her way. You do not want to cause the customer illness or death.

Warning and disclaimers: Does your menu have them? Menus should warn about consuming raw and undercooked food, possible bones in food, and possible allergens. Warnings and disclaimers should be readable, but not overwhelming, and are extremely important for protecting the restaurant as well as its customers.

These are just a few brief reminders about keeping your guests safe. By reviewing and enforcing your policies and procedures, you can avoid injuries, accidents and lawsuits. Remember the basics and use a common sense approach to keeping your premises safe for employees and customers.

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