

Good Food, Safe Food

Good food makes for a happy ship. But 'good food' has many meanings.

It has to satisfy, and personal and cultural preferences mean that choice needs to be offered. Even for one person there may be times when familiar 'comfort food' is called for, whilst there are others when taste buds are longing to be challenged with new sensations.

Good food is also the key to remaining healthy and to being in the right physical and mental state to perform the range of duties on board. This used to be seen simply in terms of a sufficient supply of energy for physically demanding jobs, but now that jobs are less physical, an oversupply of energy and consequent obesity is usually a far more serious problem than shortages and malnutrition. More is now known about the longer term effects of diet on health, and good food can also be thought of as the diet that can best keep us safe from conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

More immediately, good food means safe food that is free from any risk of infecting crew members with diseases, especially vomiting and diarrhoea - always unpleasant, sometimes dangerous and, if they affect several crew members, can be just as big a risk to the safe operation of a ship as any of the more traditional precursors of personal accident or vessel incident.

Well-trained ship's cooks follow good food hygiene practices, and so have an essential role to play in reducing the risks of infection. This training covers the purchase of food - although good quality assurance can be a problem where stores are purchased through agents in countries with poor or corrupt food safety standards. Proper storage is crucial as foods such as raw meats and root vegetables are likely to be contaminated with bacteria, often including harmful ones. Preventive measures may include surface disinfection, storage at low temperatures and separation of foods such as uncooked meats from items that will be eaten without further cooking. Similar segregation is needed during food preparation. Arrangements for other crewmembers to access food need to be such that these principles are known, understood and followed. It is encouraging that many of these hygiene rules now form part of the Maritime Labour Convention.

Crewmembers themselves may be the source of infections that put others at risk. Casual food eaten while in port may not be prepared to the same standards as food on board and thus those who have eaten ashore may bring their infections on board. Occasionally food handlers and other crewmembers may be carriers of longer-term food borne infections from their home countries. Where this is a risk, screening may be included in pre-embarkation medical exams. One golden rule for all, whether cooks or other crew members, is that if you are vomiting or have diarrhoea this is the time when you are most likely to put others at risk. Stay away from all food preparation for at least 48 hours after the last symptoms and practice even more scrupulous skin hygiene – a good two minute wash of hands before eating is always the ideal, but is mandatory in the presence of symptoms.

Some food related infections can spread rapidly. Norovirus has caused big problems in the cruise sector, but can equally well spread among crewmembers on any ship as it is so infectious. Isolation of people with symptoms in their cabins and cessation of any buffet-style eating are important controls. Remember that, if you have any cases on board, you are obliged to report them to the port health authorities in the next port. Also remember that tele-medical advisory services can give you practical advice, not only on the treatment of those with food poisoning, but on the preventative measures that you need to put in place.

You cannot have good food without good food hygiene. But even with good food hygiene good food requires well planned and generous purchasing policies, trained cooks, a choice of menus and informed seafarers who know what choices will best meet their needs for wellbeing and for continuing health.