

NATIONAL  
RESTAURANT  
ASSOCIATION

**ALWAYS  
READY:**  
FOODBORNE  
ILLNESS OUTBREAK





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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Prevention: Get ServSafe certified in safe food handling	
Reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses	
Leading causes	
Great resource: Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response	
<b>Preparation: What to do in advance</b>	<b>3</b>
Assemble your crisis management team	
Establish a designated lead/spokesperson	
Create an emergency contact list	
Create a foodborne illness complaint form	
<b>What to do when a foodborne illness is reported</b>	<b>7</b>
First response	
Customer contact don'ts	
Responding to a complaint	
What to expect from the regulatory/health authority	
<b>After a foodborne illness outbreak: Tips for recovery</b>	<b>12</b>
What to tell employees	
Responding to the media	
<b>Resources &amp; Sources</b>	<b>17</b>



# INTRODUCTION

Recent studies conducted by the U.S. Environmental Health Specialists Network (EHSN) and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) found that setting the stage for a robust food safety culture in a restaurant starts with management's dedication to safety and setting examples. By demonstrating a genuine commitment to food safety and implementing proper food safety training and policies, managers lay a strong foundation for the entire staff to follow.

One study found that restaurants with kitchen managers certified in food safety, such as the ServSafe program, were less likely to have foodborne illness outbreaks. Equally important is having the necessary food safety protocols (food safety management systems) to ensure that all employees are equally dedicated to upholding these standards.

By delving into employees' attitudes towards food safety, monitoring improvements over time, and pinpointing areas of strength or weakness, managers can proactively shape and enhance their restaurant's overall food safety practices.

Always Ready: Foodborne Illness Outbreak provides practical steps to follow should you receive notice of a potential foodborne illness outbreak and tips for navigating the outbreak to minimize damage to your restaurant's business and reputation.

It also offers guidelines on how to establish a culture of food safety because prevention is the best line of defense against a foodborne illness outbreak.

## Prevention: Get certified in safe food handling

To date, 37 states and Washington, D.C., require that managers become certified in food safety. The leading food safety training program in the country is the National Restaurant Association's course, [ServSafe®](#), which includes ServSafe Manager and ServSafe Foodhandler for employees.

When you and your team members are trained in safe food handling, everyone is armed with the information they need to reduce the risk of foodborne illness in your establishment.

## Reduce the risk of a foodborne illness outbreak

- \* **Get your managers certified** and train employees through ServSafe.
- \* **Train new employees** on food safety procedures and encourage them to take ServSafe's food safety training course.
- \* **Set rules and stick to them.** Establish standard operating procedures for performing critical safety steps (hazard analysis critical control points or HACCP) in your food-prep and service processes.
- \* **Send sick employees home** or tell them not to come in, as recommended by the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) [Food Code](#). Set a strict health policy for sick staffers—those showing specific symptoms, including vomiting and gastrointestinal distress, or who are diagnosed with or exposed to a known foodborne-illness-causing disease.
- \* **Develop recipes/instructions** that incorporate safe handling procedures within specific steps (e.g., Cook poultry until internal temp reaches 165°F.)
- \* **Invest in equipment,** facility design, and maintenance. Give employees the tools, equipment, work areas, cleaning supplies and training they need to receive, store, prepare, hold, and serve food safely.
- \* **Monitor procedures.** Let the staff know food safety is a priority that is being monitored closely.
- \* **Keep records.** Find some way, high- or low-tech, to document that the staff is following proper food safety procedures.
- \* **Make sure food safety practices and quality controls are continuous.** The manager controls the culture.

### Leading causes

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) list major risk factors that can lead to foodborne illness.

- 1. Poor personal hygiene:** Wash hands with soap and (comfortably) hot water for 20 seconds just before and immediately after handling food. Most foodborne illnesses result from failure to wash hands.
- 2. Contaminated equipment:** Clean and sanitize kitchen surfaces, equipment and utensils in between food-prep tasks.
- 3. Food from unsafe sources:** Do not accept deliveries of food that come from questionable or unvetted sources or that arrive in damaged packaging or at improper temperatures.
- 4. Failing to cook food to proper internal temperatures:** Foods need to reach specific internal temperatures to be considered safe to eat. Invest in calibrated, digital thermometers. Failing to cool hot "time/temperature control for safety (TCS)" foods properly in smaller portions, with an ice bath, ice wand or blast chiller can render foods unsafe as well. Cool TCS foods (which include proteins and cooked starches) from 135°F to 70°F within 2 hours, to 41°F or below within another 4 hours.
- 5. Holding food at improper temperatures:** Hot foods should be held above 135°F and cold foods below 41°F.



## Great resource

Check out [Foodborne Illness Response Guidelines for Owners, Operators and Managers of Food Establishments](#) developed by the [Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response](#) (CIFOR). CIFOR is a collaboration of federal, state, and local public health experts and industry food safety experts including the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, FDA, CDC, and other CIFOR member organizations. Member organizations represent epidemiology programs, environmental health programs, public health laboratories, and regulatory agencies involved in foodborne disease surveillance and outbreak response. The CIFOR Guidelines describe methods to investigate, control, and prevent foodborne disease outbreaks.

*Note: Development of the CIFOR Guidelines was supported by FDA and Cooperative Agreement #U60HM000803 and 5U38HM000449 from CDC. Printing was supported by the CDC Foundation. The contents of the document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of FDA, CSTE, CDC, or the CDC Foundation.*



# PREPARATION

## What to do in advance

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### Assemble your crisis management team

Pre-planning and a good blueprint for what to do if a foodborne illness is associated with your business can have a big impact on the safety of your guests and the ability of your business to pull through

*Somebody* needs to see to the business of being prepared.

Create a **crisis management team** to develop a foodborne illness-preparedness plan for your operation. Keep your plans streamlined and easy to put into action.

Your team should be small but include people with experience or specific knowledge in the different areas the plan will need.

Internally, the team might be comprised of management (owner, and operations and kitchen managers), food safety and quality assurance, supply chain, human resources, risk management, and communications, especially those who handle social media communications and media relations.

Make sure to include someone with the technical expertise to manage your website and social media accounts. You'll need their skills to manage messaging, especially if the first indication of a complaint or incident comes to your attention through social channels. **The crisis management team also should have quick access to:**

- \* Legal counsel
- \* A professional crisis-management public relations consultant
- \* An official from the local regulatory/health department

If your operation is small and you don't have access to all these functions, you might want to research a consulting firm ahead of time that can provide the support you need to write your plan. You might even consider a contract to have them support you, testing your plan periodically. Crises, when they happen, tend to move very fast and the best time to prepare for them is before you're facing one.

Charge your crisis management team to execute the following:

- \* **Assess your risk:** Are you prepared for a foodborne illness incident? Note: an “incident” can be being accused of causing or being identified as a source in a foodborne illness and both jeopardize the business.
- \* **Minimize the risks with preventive measures.** This resource is designed to help.
- \* **Create a simple “In Case of a Foodborne Illness” action plan** that includes an emergency contact list showing **who to call first** (identifying the designated lead/spokesperson) and provides a list of first steps to take.
- \* **Create a recovery contact list** to address after-incident needs.
- \* **Schedule a way to update these steps** to keep them current and viable.

***Give your team a specific time frame to complete these exercises.***

## The designated lead/spokesperson

In the case of a foodborne illness complaint or notice, it's **imperative** to keep employees apprised of what to do and say and what *not* to do and say and to manage the complaint process.

**This is why it is critical to appoint a designated lead/spokesperson either at the unit level or corporate level.**

This is the person/position every employee knows to connect with at the first notice of a foodborne illness complaint. This person should be at the center of all information gathering, to whom all information is fed.

The lead may be part of the on-site staff (such as the owner or manager) or hold a corporate role (such as head of food safety). This person could be the designated spokesperson, or could be in charge of identifying the spokesperson who should speak on behalf of the restaurant to regulatory authorities and the media.



## Create an emergency contact list

In the case of a foodborne illness report or incident, you may need to get in touch with key people in and outside your organization to apprise them of the situation. For that, you'll need an emergency contact list. For each entry, you'll want the contact's name, mobile and office numbers, and email address.

If you're part of a multiunit operation, you might also want to include contact information for other units close to you.

### Contact suggestions include:

- \* Designated Lead/Spokesperson
- \* Owner/Manager
- \* Kitchen Manager/Chef
- \* Regulatory/Health Department Rep. – local and state
- \* Crisis Management PR Consultant
- \* Corporate Contact(s) – if applicable
  - \* Food Safety Lead
  - \* Emergency Response Rep./Risk Manager
  - \* President/CEO
  - \* Division President
  - \* Area/Region/District Manager
  - \* Corporate Comms/Media Relations Rep.
- \* Lawyer
- \* Main Vendors/Suppliers
- \* Local Laboratory Service



## Create a complaint form

This form, created in advance, will help the designated lead/spokesperson gather information without omitting any critical details. If the designated lead/spokesperson is not available, the form will help guide any employee who takes the complaint.

Here's what your complaint form might include:

- \* Restaurant name/address
- \* Phone
- \* Customer name
- \* Male/female
- \* Age
- \* Address
- \* Customer phone number
- \* Name of person reporting the incident if other than complainant
- \* Reporting person's phone number
- \* Date and time of meal
- \* Payment method (cash, credit)
- \* Description of items eaten
- \* Did the customer take leftovers home? If so, are they still available for testing?
- \* Description of symptoms and which symptom came first
- \* Time between the meal to the onset of symptoms
- \* Duration of illness
- \* If customer sought medical treatment, name, address and phone of doctor, clinic and/or hospital
- \* Number of persons in party; ask if others are ill (if more than one person is ill, complete separate report for each)
- \* Does customer remember server's name or description?
- \* Complaint received by: Name/title of employee filling the form
- \* Date and time complaint received
- \* Was complaint received face-to-face or by phone, text, or over social media?
- \* Was complainant referred to the local health department?



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# WHAT TO DO WHEN A FOODBORNE ILLNESS IS REPORTED

There are different ways to find out about foodborne illness complaints:

- \* The local health department gets in touch to let you know they're investigating a complaint from a restaurant patron.
- \* An employee informs you they're infected with a pathogen after working a shift and handling food.
- \* A supplier tells you foods you purchased have been compromised/recalled.
- \* The operation receives a call from a customer complaining your food gave them food poisoning.
- \* The operation is implicated on social media accounts, restaurant review sites or other comment platforms.

When you find out there's a report of foodborne illness, take it seriously but understand that nothing is established until the incident is investigated.

## First response

Train the entire staff to hand off any call or post about a possible foodborne illness to the designated lead/spokesperson.

If the designated lead/spokesperson is not available, a team member can document the complaint by filling in the preset complaint form (see p. 6).

Make sure the person recording details of a complaint knows that this information is HIGHLY confidential; the **implication** of a foodborne illness is as damaging to an operation as a foodborne illness outbreak.



## Customer contact don'ts

Make sure your team members know what questions, statements and actions to avoid when documenting a complaint from a customer.

- \* **Don't deny their claim** by saying things like "You couldn't have gotten sick here," or "We haven't had any other complaints." Just take down the facts and tell the customer the restaurant will investigate and be in touch.
- \* **Don't give a copy** of the incident report to the guest. It's for internal investigation only.
- \* **Don't let the guest** fill out the incident report.
- \* **Don't suggest symptoms.** Don't ask "Are you dizzy, nauseated, etc.?" Let the customer use his or her own words to describe symptoms.
- \* **Don't offer any medical advice,** medical reimbursement or promise any specific actions on the restaurant's part beyond assurance that the matter will be investigated, and the customer will be contacted.
- \* **If theirs is the only complaint you receive**—an isolated incident—tell them you will look into the matter and do so. If you're unable to determine a likely cause for the illness (i.e., there are no other complaints, you've cleared employees' health and actions, or you've served a large number of the "suspect item(s)" with no other complaints), make sure you get back in touch with the complainant to let them know you've investigated their complaint but cannot identify a cause.
- \* **Do not offer anything to "make up for their experience."** That could be construed as admitting liability. If the complaint is genuine (but can't be traced to you), it's unlikely they'll want to return to your establishment despite it not being the cause. If they ask for compensation, the foodborne illness accusation could just be a scam to get free food.

## Legal experts who represent restaurants often advise the following in the event of a foodborne illness outbreak:

- \* **Don't admit liability** or even the possibility of liability, because until investigated thoroughly, you really don't know that your restaurant caused the illness. Good employees want to own a problem and have a tendency to want to take care of the customer, but don't let them say, "We'll take care of this for you."
- \* **Don't say, "I'm sorry you got sick after eating here."** Do say, "I'm sorry you're not feeling well. Please help me to gather your information."

When the illness complaint is limited to a single person or members of a single household, encourage the complainant to contact their local health department where authorities are trained on how to navigate these types of incidents. People often attribute an illness to the last thing they ate, but **most foodborne illness pathogens have an incubation period longer than 24 hours.**



The image is a promotional graphic for ServSafe. It features a dark blue background with a grid of white icons representing various food safety and service concepts. The ServSafe logo, consisting of the word "ServSafe" in white and "National Restaurant Association" in smaller text below it, is centered at the top. Below the logo, the phrase "SERVE WITH CONFIDENCE" is written in large, bold, white capital letters. Underneath this, a paragraph of white text reads: "With ServSafe training and certifications, health and safety are always top of mind. From food safety and allergen awareness to responsible alcohol service and more, our solutions reduce risk and increase confidence in your team's skills." At the bottom of the graphic, a white button with a blue border contains the text "DISCOVER OUR TRAINING PROGRAMS" in blue capital letters.

## Responding to a complaint

If the complaint was issued by 2 or more customers, or if any report was so severe that it involved hospitalization, immediately obtain help for the rest of the investigation.

1. Obtain complaint forms for each complainant.
2. Contact your crisis management team and ask for next steps.



### Those steps might include:

- \* Contacting your local health department to apprise them of the complaints and asking regulators for next steps.
- \* Determining from the complaint forms which foods are suspect.
- \* Removing a particular dish or ingredient from service.
- \* Querying employees' health and sending any ill worker home (and isolating any food the employee touched). Asking employees if they're aware of illnesses among close contacts (sick kids, sick roommates, etc.)
- \* Making sure any suspect food is retained, contained and isolated, and clearly labeled DO NOT TOUCH so that it's not served and does not come in contact with other foods or food-prep surfaces.
- \* Following regulatory/health department guidance on how to preserve the food for sampling.
- \* The regulatory/health department is best equipped to get in contact with your suppliers and handle the situation from there, but you can give your suppliers a heads up about the foodborne illness incident.

## Gather documentation

The following are examples of documentation you might need to assemble for the regulatory/health authorities:

- \* Employee work schedules
- \* Employee work duties
- \* Complainant charge slip
- \* Purchase invoices for all foods received
- \* Records of all foods picked up from wholesale food establishments, local suppliers, grocery stores, and produce and farmers' markets

Generally, the safest course is to call the health department, and certainly if there are multiple complaints or hospitalizations involved. The health department will eventually be notified anyway, and establishing a cooperative stance with health officials is to your benefit.

You should consult with your operation's attorney about the specific laws in your jurisdiction concerning your rights and responsibilities, but generally the health department is authorized to:

- \* Take reasonable samples of suspect foods
- \* Embargo those foods to prevent their sale
- \* Require employees to undergo medical and laboratory examinations
- \* Exclude sick employees from food-handling duties
- \* In extreme cases, order the facility to be closed

When the health department investigators come to talk to you, be cooperative. Have appropriate records available for review (customer charge slips, supply invoices, etc.) and allow the investigators reasonable access to what they request to observe.

Be frank and candid—but don't feel compelled to volunteer more information than requested. Check with your attorney about legal limits on protected disclosures. Privacy issues can come into play (personal info from customers and employees and/or information proprietary to the company).

## What to expect from the regulatory/health authority

Regulatory/health department authorities can both help you identify a suspect food and clear your food as the source of a foodborne illness outbreak.

According to [CIFOR](#), the regulatory/health authority may sample foods from the restaurant and perform lab analysis in an attempt to find the source of the illness. It could be the food was contaminated...

- ✦ prior to its arrival at the restaurant or contaminated on site by a sick employee
- ✦ from contact with contaminated raw food or unsanitary equipment on site
- ✦ by the consumer or other food handler/preparer outside your restaurant

The goal is to identify the source of the problem quickly and initiate control measures at all appropriate levels including at the restaurant, distributor, and supplier.

- ✦ Before you use, move or discard any food that may have been served during the time period of interest for the outbreak, contact your regulatory/health authority. Hold any implicated food under control (at proper temperature, clearly labeled DO NOT TOUCH) until the authority decides it needs to collect samples for lab analysis.
- ✦ If the regulatory/health authority takes product samples, **the restaurant should secure a portion of those same samples** as backup in case the initial samples become compromised, and for the restaurant's own lab testing procedures. But note: If samples are not carefully handled, labeled, and secured using aseptic sampling methods, they can be contaminated.
- ✦ [CIFOR's](#) guide offers a tool to help you develop a plan for a proper "sample chain of custody" but the regulatory/health authority's test results will typically be considered official.
- ✦ Consult with food testing professionals, legal advisors, and/or the accredited lab before having the samples tested to make sure the correct tests are done.





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# AFTER A FOODBORNE ILLNESS OUTBREAK: Tips for recovery

It's critical to communicate with your team and reassure your customers, suppliers, media and regulators that you've taken the necessary steps to ensure such an incident never occurs again.

The taint of unsafe food is one of the toughest to shake. Even restaurants completely exonerated of fault still can take a hit because rumors of "food poisoning" persist.

## What to tell employees

If there's a suspected outbreak involving the restaurant, it's important to communicate with employees to inform them of the situation, control rumors and clarify expectations and actions, according to [CIFOR](#). You can share:

- \* General info about the outbreak including what caused the illness, if confirmed.
- \* Preventive measures employees can take to protect themselves and others from becoming ill. Be specific to the illness in question, if known.
- \* Specific guidance that all questions by the public and/or the media should be directed to the designated spokesperson. Establish clear directives that employees are not to post about the issue on social media.
- \* The expectation that all employees provide all relevant information requested by the regulatory/health authority, including their health status. Be sure to consult with your legal counsel on this step and the next few.
- \* The expectation for employees to have a positive interaction with the regulatory/health authority when they visit the food establishment.
- \* Potential for the regulatory/health authority to recommend employees get treatment if exposed to certain diseases or chemicals.
- \* The food establishment's sick leave policy with a reminder that employees who become ill with certain symptoms need to notify the person-in-charge and leave work immediately.



If your restaurant was identified as a possible source of an outbreak, expect a long process to win back the dining public's faith in you. Take these proactive steps, and don't be shy about spreading the word of what you're doing to protect your customers:

- \* Clean and sanitize the premises top to bottom, kitchen, dining room, restrooms, anywhere hand contact is made throughout.
- \* Clean out and organize cold and dry storage, toss outdated items.
- \* Re-evaluate vendors, establish strict procedures for receiving and storing food.
- \* Re-evaluate food preparation and serving practices.
- \* Re-evaluate your food safety management systems and make necessary changes to make them optimally effective. Re-enroll managers in a food safety certification course. Put them in charge of training the rest of your employees to reinforce the urgency for safe food handling practices.
- \* Review regulatory exclusion requirements for managing sick employees and enforce them at all times.

If these steps sound familiar, they should. They're steps we recommend you follow to *prevent* a foodborne illness incident in your establishment.



## Responding to the media

If word of a foodborne illness outbreak at your restaurant gets out, media will want to talk about it. It's important to be prepared to respond to media questions and manage the facts. Here are some tips for dealing with the media:

- \* **The designated spokesperson** should handle all media interviews and be the only person to make public statements. By having just one spokesperson, your operation will have a centralized source of information and convey a more consistent message. When dealing with legal or personnel issues, always consult with legal counsel before answering questions.
- \* **Get the facts straight.** Find out what happened and know all the facts inside and out. If the story is breaking and you don't have all of the facts yet, be clear that you are still gathering information, and this is what you know right now. Do not guess or speculate about the situation. If you report misinformation, even mistakenly, it can undermine your credibility. Immediately create a fact sheet to use as a reference tool so you're ready if the media contacts you. Review the facts with legal to ensure the information you're planning to share is appropriate. Never disclose customer or employee information.
- \* **Tell employees not to speak to the media,** but to politely direct all inquiries to the designated spokesperson. Do not let them speak or post on the restaurant's behalf.
- \* **Develop a media statement.** Write a brief statement that explains the situation and how your restaurant is handling it, professionally and compassionately. Make it clear the welfare of the customers and community is your priority. Legal counsel should review any statement before it is made public. A carefully worded, concise statement will provide the media with your key points. Make sure the tone of the statement is appropriate; that it is sincere and caring. You can release the statement broadly, or you might decide it's appropriate to simply have it on hand for media requests. If you post your statement on your social media accounts or on your website, it's likely that reporters will use it in their story.
- \* **Stay ahead of the game.** If your restaurant is in a crisis, you want to get your company statement to the media as quickly as possible. This helps you to shape the story first instead of letting the media or disgruntled customers do so. By communicating the correct information to the media, you may stop rumors and provide reassurance to the public. Key media contacts should be on your emergency contact list.
- \* **Respond when the media calls,** don't ignore them. This is your opportunity to share your information. Tell them the facts as you know them. Do not speculate. Train the designated spokesperson to ask all reporters what their deadlines are so your operation can prioritize and respond to inquiries quickly. Reporters will post their stories with or without your input.



- \* **Be factual.** While not everything that's known is necessary to include in a public statement, there is no role for lies or misleading statements.
- \* **Identify confidential information ahead of time.** There may be proprietary information that you don't want to share with the media or the public. Don't wait for a media inquiry to determine what information should remain confidential. Again, consult with your legal counsel.
- \* **Admit that you don't have all the answers.** If you don't know the answer to a question, let the reporter know that rather than guessing. If you think that you'll be able to track down the information, simply say, "I'll get back to you on that," and then make sure to follow up. Never say, "No comment."
- \* **Don't respond to hearsay.** If a reporter tells you what someone else has said about the situation, don't feel compelled to respond to the other person's comments. Instead, simply restate the facts as you know them.
- \* **Don't become hostile** and never repeat a negative accusation made against your restaurant in a statement or in response to a question. Always counter inaccuracies about your establishment and correct them.
- \* **Don't demand to see the story before it runs.** Journalists have the authority for their editorial control and will ask for your input, if needed.

## Social media response do's and don'ts

Crisis comms in the digital age require a new layer of caution and a fast response—a combination that can be hard to execute well if you don't prepare in advance.

Information and misinformation can go viral in minutes on social media and the potential for backlash to an unvetted response is a real thing.





**1. Prepare a response in advance.** Craft responses for 2 scenarios:

- a. Your restaurant is implicated but not verified as the cause in allegations of a foodborne illness
- b. Your restaurant has been verified as the source of a foodborne illness

You can fill in details of a specific incident in real time, but the framework of your messaging can be developed ahead of time. As you craft a response, consider:

- \* What do you know about the social audiences reading your response?
- \* What will your followers expect you to say? “Read the room” and avoid pat or tone-deaf messaging that misses your followers’ expectations.
- \* What can you tell them? What should you avoid saying?
- \* Is your tone and message sincere, serious, honest, human?
- \* If you are at fault, let a crisis management professional or the designated spokesperson handle the messaging and speak on behalf of leadership.
- \* Don’t admit fault if the incident is not verified, but don’t deny anything yet either. State the facts as you know them and what you’re doing about the situation.
- \* Don’t speculate, and never cast blame.
- \* Don’t respond to troll baiting or negative posts.

Make all messaging consistent throughout all social platforms and keep it professional.

**2. Diligently monitor social activity.** There are tools that alert you to spikes in activity and trends toward negative sentiment on your social accounts. Consider if investing in one would help your team monitor increased activity and social sentiment about your restaurant so you can respond quickly.

**3. Immediately shut down** all regularly scheduled organic and paid social posts and ads. They can come across as oblivious, tone-deaf or insensitive.

**In any moment of crisis, stress levels are high, and mistakes can easily happen if there isn’t a plan everyone knows to follow. Having a well-thought-out crisis response plan can help focus your response, saving you money, time, and credibility. Being Always Ready is just good business.**

# RESOURCES AND SOURCES

## ***Centers for Disease Control and Prevention***

Foodborne Diseases Centers for Outbreak Response Enhancement

## ***CIFOR***

CIFOR Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response

CIFOR Industry Guidelines: Foodborne Illness Response Guidelines for Owners, Operators and Managers of Food Establishments

## ***FDA***

U.S. Food & Drug Administration Food Code

## ***National Restaurant Association***

The Foodservice Operator's Crisis Management Manual, National Restaurant Association, 1987

## ***Orange County Health Care Agency***

Top 5 Foodborne Illness Risk Factors | Orange County California - Health Care Agency

## ***Recipe for Readiness***

A Step-by-Step Guide to Crisis Communications, XenophonStrategies for the National Restaurant Association, 2004

## ***ServSafe***

ServSafe.com

## ***Xenophon Strategies (PR, Crisis, Digital, Social, ESG)***

xenophonstrategies.com

NATIONAL  
RESTAURANT  
ASSOCIATION

**ALWAYS  
READY:**  
FOODBORNE  
ILLNESS OUTBREAK

