

How Safe is Street Vendor Food?

Navajo County Public Health District

There are few things in Life that involve as much trust as eating food prepared by someone else. Realize that the Centers for Disease Control estimates that foodborne diseases cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths in the United States each year. Up to 40% of the cases are generated in the home kitchen. For this reason, public health laws have been established and safe food handling guidelines developed over the years to assure food purchased in a restaurant or grocery store has been handled and prepared to high standards. There are over 600 food service establishments in Navajo County that are inspected by your Navajo County Public Health District and are required to abide by the State laws regarding safe food. Yet many people continue to purchase food from individuals who are not inspected and licensed and who prepare food under less than ideal conditions.

Street vendors are a big concern in our County. The State of Arizona Food Code requires that anyone who provides food to the public do so in a licensed facility manned by knowledgeable staff. Private kitchens in the home normally do not have the capability to handle large volumes of food. Not many home kitchens have a hand wash sink or commercial refrigerators to cool large volumes of food. State law prohibits the use of the home kitchen for production of potentially hazardous foods for public consumption.

The individual who prepares food in their home kitchen often does so under less than sanitary conditions. The three housecats are allowed to climb on the kitchen counters and the pet pooch gets to lick the spoon clean. Cockroaches and flies are a nuisance that can be easily brushed aside. Frozen ground beef is placed on the kitchen counter overnight to thaw allowing the rapid growth of dangerous bacteria. There is no place to wash hands and so hands are dipped into the standing dishwater and slapped dry on a soiled towel. The baby's diaper is changed on top the kitchen table, the same table that will later be used to prepare food. Opened cans are placed directly on the stove top to heat and the plastic coating lining the inside melts into the food. Sound too disgusting to be true? Not so. Sometimes the situation is worse. One woman selling street vendor food also worked in a restaurant. Her 'supplies' were food items gathered from the garbage cans and taken home and prepared for sales on her day off. She told the restaurant owner she was taking the waste food home to feed to the dogs.

Besides the high risk to your personal health, purchase of food from an unlicensed street vendor also hurts the legitimate restaurant operator and the legitimate street vendor. It is a large investment to open a commercial food operation and purchase proper equipment, hire and train staff, and meet all health, safety, and building codes. The unlicensed street vendor cooking lunch in

the tool shed or garage has none of these overhead costs. While the unlicensed street vendor has none of these costs, the legitimate operator is paying taxes, employing people, and paying to assure safe food is going to his customers. And guess who is most likely to have liability insurance to cover the costs of a verified foodborne illness or other customer injury? Hint: Not the unlicensed street vendor.

Some illegal street vendors prepare food to supplement their income while others do so to obtain drugs and alcohol. It's unfortunate but true that some will take their food stamps or food provided by the WIC program, prepare street vendor food items, then use the cash to feed their drug habit. Food meant to feed children or to assist someone gets converted instead to drug money. Street vendors are sometimes dealing illegal drugs, using the food operation as a front for drug customers.

The next time you are approached by a street vendor, ask to see the person's 'Permit to Operate' from the Health Department. If they have a permit, it means that an inspector has been in their kitchen operation and judged it to meet the minimums of the State Law for a commercial operation. Don't settle for a 'Business Permit' since this just means that the City has collected a fee for operating a business. It doesn't mean that the operation has been judged safe and sanitary. City governments may be assuming some liability by issuing a business permit without also insisting that the food vendor make proper application for a Health Permit as required by State Law.

The Navajo County Public Health District Inspectors are ready to assist the citizen who wants to open a licensed food service operation. In the Show Low area, call (928) 532-6050 and in the Holbrook-Winslow area, call (928) 524-4750.