



# Food Safety & Nutrition

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## Food Safety and Buffet Etiquette

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Eating out at a buffet can be a good value for your money as you can consume as much as you wish for one price. But eating at a buffet can be a food safety challenge, both for the food service establishment as well as you as a customer. The restaurant that serves a buffet follows specific guidelines of making sure all the food is kept within proper temperatures. Cold foods such as salad bar foods should be kept cool and in small serving quantities to be changed regularly. When changing the food, new bowls of the food are used rather than just adding fresh food to the same serving bowl that has some remaining food in it. If foods are hot, they are to be kept on a heating element or under a light that will keep them hot. Serving utensils should be provided for each food.

In all that a restaurant may do to keep foods safe for their customers, there are some responsibilities of the customer to help keep the food safe as well. How customers choose to serve themselves and handle themselves at the buffet line can help or hinder the safety of the food for themselves and other customers. Below are a few things to think about the next time you go through a buffet line.

- Number one is to wash your hands. After arriving at the restaurant, go into the bathroom and wash your hands. Your hands have probably come into contact with your face, hair, doorknobs and other places where they can pick up bacteria and germs that you don't want to consume with your food. So wash well with warm water, soap and dry with a paper towel.
- Use the serving utensil that is provided for each specific food item. Do not use one utensil to serve several food items. If one food item happens to be contaminated and others are not and you use the same spoon for serving, then that cross-contaminates them all.
- Place the serving utensil on a plate or spoon holder rather than in back in the food. If there is not a separate spoon holder available then put it back into the item, but be sure the handle does not touch the food. For example, setting the lettuce tongs on top of the salad is not a good idea. Remember hands transmit many kinds of bacteria and diseases.
- Don't use your hands to serve food. Use serving tongs or utensils. If there are none available, ask a service person for one.
- Do not eat in the buffet line. Those eating while standing in the buffet line can contaminate food. Saliva can spray on the food and pass on bacteria to other consumers. So while in the buffet line do not eat from your plate or from the serving utensils. (Yes I have seen people use the serving utensils or their fingers to taste the food before taking more or leaving it alone!) If you are unsure about a food, take a sample on your plate to taste at your table. If you are concerned about what the flavor is or ingredients used, ask a server about it rather than tasting it.
- Most buffets have a glass or plastic sneeze guard that comes down over the food. The intention is for customers

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to look through the glass as they serve themselves, not to put their heads, arms and bodies under it. Only reach your arm under to serve as necessary.

- When going back for additional servings use a clean plate. Don't take your eating utensils with you. Leave them at your table setting on a clean napkin or ask for clean eating utensils.
- If you have to sneeze or cough, try to step back away from the buffet line, or sneeze into your shoulder. If you can, remove yourself from the line and then return after you are done and have washed your hands again if necessary. A sneeze guard over the food doesn't mean that it is to sneeze on!
- If you have long sleeves that may dangle into the food, roll them up if possible. Coats, jackets and long sleeves can drag across the food.
- Be sure to take what you touch. If you touch a bread roll, put it on the plate, don't change your mind and put it back.
- Help children to learn these rules as well. Always accompany a child to the buffet line to be sure they are using serving utensils, not eating while in the buffet line, or coughing on the food. Help children learn to not use their hands and fingers as serving and eating utensils in the buffet line.

These items may seem like common sense, but I have seen all of these problems in buffet lines and restaurants. We expect our food to be served safely, but when it comes to buffet lines it needs to be teamwork – the restaurant and customers to keep the food safe.

For more information or food safety questions contact the WSU Extension office at 360-397-6060.

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