

Menu Check-Up: Protecting High-Risk Populations

Introduction for Trainers

High-risk populations include babies and young children, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems. These guests are not just more likely to get sick from foodborne illness because they are more likely to experience severe complications, hospitalization, or even death from foods that may be safe for healthy adults.

For these guests, food safety isn't about preference or taste. Instead, it's about protection. Certain foods and preparation methods increase risk because they may contain harmful bacteria or viruses, even when they look, smell, and taste fine. Our job is to recognize higher-risk menu items and make smart adjustments so we serve food that is both delicious and safe.

Key Things to Avoid Serving to High-Risk Populations

High-risk populations should never be served:

- Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, or seafood
- Raw or lightly cooked eggs (including runny yolks)
- Unpasteurized milk, juice, or cheese
- Raw sprouts (alfalfa, clover, bean sprouts)
- Sushi, sashimi, ceviche, or other raw seafood dishes
- Rare or medium-rare burgers
- Cold deli meats unless reheated to steaming hot
- Foods made with raw dough or batter

Why these foods are risky:

- They are more likely to contain bacteria like Salmonella, Listeria, E. coli, or Norovirus
- High-risk guests may not have the immune strength to fight these illnesses

What Employees Should Look For During the Menu Check-Up

Ask employees to review the menu and identify items that involve:

- Raw or undercooked ingredients
- Minimal cooking or no kill step
- Cooling and reheating steps
- Cold holding for extended periods
- Hand assembly or high-touch preparation
- Foods served without further cooking
- These items don't always need to be removed—but they must be handled with extra care or adjusted.



Menu Check-Up Activity

Instructions:

Provide employees with a copy of the menu. Working as a team, review each section and answer the following questions:

- Which menu items could pose a higher risk to high-risk populations?
- Why might this item be risky?
- What changes could we make to reduce that risk?

Encourage discussion and problem-solving.

Examples of Menu Adjustments to Improve Safety

Egg Dishes

Risk: Scrambled eggs or omelets cooked lightly

Safer Option: Cook eggs until firm or use pasteurized egg products

Why: Pasteurized eggs reduce Salmonella risk

Burgers and Ground Meat

Risk: Burgers cooked less than well-done

Safer Option: Require burgers be cooked to 155°F or higher

Why: Ground meat spreads bacteria throughout the product

Deli Meats

Risk: Cold deli meats served without reheating

Safer Option: Reheat deli meats to 165°F for high-risk guests

Why: Listeria can grow even in refrigeration

Cheese and Dairy

Risk: Unpasteurized cheeses or milk

Safer Option: Use only pasteurized dairy products

Why: Pasteurization kills harmful bacteria

Produce Items

Risk: Raw sprouts or poorly washed produce

Safer Option: Remove sprouts from menus for high-risk populations; wash produce thoroughly

Why: Sprouts grow in warm, moist environments ideal for bacteria

Ready-to-Eat Foods

Risk: Extended cold holding or improper date marking

Safer Option: Strict date marking and temperature monitoring

Why: Listeria thrives in cold environments over time



Discussion Questions for the Team

- “Which menu items would you be most concerned about serving to a toddler or senior?”
- “What small changes could make a big safety difference?”
- “How do we communicate these adjustments to guests respectfully?”

Wrap-Up Talking Points for Managers

“Serving high-risk populations means holding ourselves to a higher standard.”

“Food safety decisions start with the menu, not just the kitchen.”

“If we wouldn’t serve it to our own family members, we shouldn’t serve it to our guests.”

Trainer Tip

Have teams mark menu items with:

- Low Risk
- Higher Risk – Extra Care Needed
- Not Appropriate for High-Risk Guests

