

Packing House Safety

By Sharon Scofield

Food handling safety, biosecurity, mechanical safety and forklift safety are important elements of a well managed packing house. Below are potential hazards and suggested preventive measures to keep our food, and the packing house workers, safe.

Food Handling Safety is important to keeps fruits and vegetables clean & safe to eat, and make the worksite more pleasant for everyone. Safe food handling starts with good personal hygiene. Personal hygiene includes proper hand washing. Hand washing should be done before starting work, before and after using the toilet, before & after eating or smoking, and after handling garbage.

Here are a few additional good hygiene habits to follow when working in a packing house:

- Avoid wearing jewelry
- Do not handle produce if you are ill
- Keep long hair up
- Use personal protective equipment such as gloves, safety glasses, hairnets or hats

Biosecurity is every owner and employee's responsibility to avoid contamination of the food source. Owners can maintain a safe workplace by not allowing general access to the packing house. This can be accomplished by having visitors report to the main office, locking buildings and vehicles at night, locking unused buildings, and storing chemicals in a separate locked area.

Employees can assist with biosecurity by being aware of any suspicious activity, such as strangers, abnormal activities, and unusual substances. Employees should report anything suspicious to their supervisor.

Mechanical Safety is necessary to avoid hazards such as entanglements in rotating machinery in packing houses. Equipment has wrap points and pull-in points that can catch loose clothes, jewelry, and long hair. Employers and employees can both participate in safe machinery operation. Employers can train employees on proper operation of processing line equipment, the location of the nearest shut off switch for the workstation, and the appropriate attire and personal protective equipment (PPE) to wear. Make sure all shields and guards are on equipment. Consider providing First Aid and CPR training.

Employees should wear required personal protective equipment, snug fitting clothing and close-toed shoes, keep hands away from moving parts, and avoid wearing jewelry. Employees should never bypass safety guards or try to correct jams or repair machinery without authorization and notify a supervisor immediately about any problems with the

line. Contact a supervisor when uncertain about a job task or how to operate the packing house equipment.

General packing house safety involves using care when walking on wet floors, using handrails on stairs, maintaining a clean, uncluttered work area, and picking up produce on the floor. Drops and culls should not go back on the line

Forklift Safety is important to avoid worker injuries and costly machinery and building repairs. Most injuries occur when the forklift hits a bystander. Forklift operators need to be trained and authorized to operate a forklift. A daily walk-around inspection of the forklift is important prior to use to correct any problems. Operators should stay alert, watch out for others, as well as yourself, monitor the condition of your truck and the area you are working in, wear safety equipment when needed, never use drugs or alcohol before coming to work or on the job, and be careful of over-the-counter or prescription drugs that may impair your ability to operate your lift truck safely.

Employees should always be alert to forklifts. Never ride on a forklift or stand under the forks. Pedestrians have the right of way, however make sure the operator knows your whereabouts. A horn should sound when the operator is backing up, at intersections, traveling through doors, and anywhere the operator's vision is limited.

If you would like an on-farm training on packing house safety, please call 800-343-7527 ext 236 or email sscofield@nycamh.com. We offer no-cost on-farm safety surveys and worker trainings to farms in New York State. These voluntary and confidential services are funded in part by the New York State Department of Labor Hazard Abatement Board. NYCAMH is a program of Bassett Healthcare Network and enhances agricultural and rural health by preventing and treating agricultural injury and illness.