

Dirty ice can make you sick

Are food-handlers taking the same precautions with ice?

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It began as a medical mystery that made big news in Phoenix, Arizona. A healthy 15-year-old boy played a round of golf, went home and by morning he was dead.

For days, Scott Beeman had no idea why his son died... but then, a clue: He'd played in a junior golf tournament that day, and dozens of others young golfers also got sick.

Health officials traced a gastrointestinal illness to coolers containing drinking water for the golfers.

Scott Beeman: It was from something in those igloo coolers.

That something was Norovirus. Officials believe a sick employee who had not washed his hands contaminated the ice in the coolers.

It's the food no one thinks of as, well, food. And if contaminated food can make you sick, can ice do the same? We asked an expert.

Debra Huffman, microbiologist: Anything that we're going to consume, if it's not handled properly, can cause a health risk.

Scott Beeman and some 80 other golfers learned this firsthand in 2002.

Norovirus is rarely fatal to healthy people, the 15-year-old died because he choked on his vomit. The golf course settled a wrongful death lawsuit filed by the Beemans for \$3 million dollars without admitting wrongdoing. The boy's father is still reeling from the tragedy.

Beeman: What happened to my son could have been avoided. What happened to the other 80-some people that got sick should have been avoided.

How? It's simple, says Debra Huffman, a microbiologist with the University of South Florida—soap and water. In this country, she says, it's not the water used to make ice that usually makes people sick, it's the way people handle the ice.

Huffman: Most people don't realize that not washing their hands could cause death. They just don't see the risk.

People can pass germs to ice just as easily they can to other foods, she says, and never realize it.

Huffman: It's not going to smell funny. It's not going to look funny. These are microscopic, and so you're not going to see it. You wouldn't know it happened.

That may be why many people who handle ice don't seem all that concerned, even though scientists say ice actually can preserve some germs.

We took our hidden cameras to 20 food service locations: fast food places, mall eateries, hotel restaurants and stadium vendors. We collected ice samples from each place for testing. And as we ordered our drinks, we carefully observed how employees actually handle ice.

Right away we saw employees dredge the cups directly through the ice with their bare hands. This is a big food safety no-no—and a health code violation.

Huffman: Anything that's contacted her hand, now you're running it all the way through the ice. Microbes are great travelers.

We also saw something on our hidden cameras that didn't look unsafe—workers using a scoop to retrieve ice.

Victoria Corderi, Dateline correspondent: A worker scoops the ice, drops it back in. **Huffman:** Yep, it's exactly what we don't want him doing. That handle of the scoop, if you gonna handle it with bare hands it, should never go back into the ice that we're going to serve.

Anything that you can transfer from your hands to another surface, in this case it would be the scoop first, and then from the scoop to the ice can transmit the pathogens, the ice'll be consumed. And then you're gonna get it.

And that made the next thing we noticed a little more disturbing: employees who handle ice touch everything around the service counter, including money — which means they could possibly contaminate the scoop and anything else they touch.

Huffman: They're still not thinking ice as something that you're consuming. They're not thinking of ice. That's why it's called "a forgotten food."

Only once did we see a worker doing it correctly: stowing the ice scoop outside the bin, so neither her hand nor the scoop's handle touches the ice.

It's impossible to estimate how often ice becomes contaminated— or just how many people get sick from contaminated ice. Unless they become very ill, says Huffman, they usually suffer their intestinal bugs in silence.

Huffman: They're typically not going to go see their physician. **Corderi:** And have no idea that it came from contaminated ice. **Huffman:** That's correct. But more likely associate it with something that they ate that didn't agree with them.

Dr. Huffman tested our 20 samples of ice and found one of them was contaminated. Surprisingly, it came from a place you might think would be safe -- a self-serve soda machine.

Huffman: We did find one of these samples, in fact, was contaminated by fecal matter.

It may have been self-serve, but the ice still had to be loaded by hand, Huffman says, likely by an employee with dirty hands.

Corderi: Someone hearing that would say, "Well, that's certainly gross." But is it more than that? **Huffman:** Absolutely. The fact that we detected these indicators mean that other things might be present. And that's the risk.

Things, she says, like hepatitis or salmonella or a host of intestinal bugs that are dangerous to the very young, the elderly and anyone with a weak immune system.

Huffman: It doesn't take high concentrations to make you sick. Especially with the viruses.

Ice handling is part of food safety training, says Donna Garren of the National Restaurant Association.

Donna Garren, National Restaurant Association: Obviously we do not condone restaurant companies and their employees not observing food safety practices. The vast majority of our restaurant industry does comply and they take it very seriously.

So, what can you do to reduce the risk of getting sick, experts say you should pay attention to how servers handle the ice... or skip it altogether.

And as for those soda machines - look for one with a built in ice maker like this one that doesn't require loading.

It's simply a matter, of remembering what can happen—if ice falls into the wrong hands.

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