

Ensuring Personal and Produce Safety for Packinghouse Visitors



Why Is Packinghouse Safety Important for a Visitor?

A packinghouse can be a bustling and chaotic environment, making it challenging to comprehend everything at first glance. It is important for visitors to know and practice safety when visiting a packinghouse in order to keep themselves, employees, and consumers safe from harm. With the many activities that occur in a packinghouse, numerous safety measures must be observed by visitors. These measures help ensure the overall safety of everyone involved and maintain the quality and safety of the produce being processed.

Clothing

When preparing to visit a packinghouse, there are important considerations to keep in mind regarding attire:

- Wear closed-toed shoes that fully enclose the foot, such as sneakers or boots, to protect against hazards.
- Remove earrings, watches, and other personal accessories to prevent jewelry from getting caught in equipment or falling into the production line, which would contaminate produce.
- Keep hair tied up and covered with a hat or hairnet to prevent loose hair from falling onto the production line or getting caught in machinery. Cover facial hair with a beard or facial hairnet to ensure that it is properly contained and does not pose a contamination risk.
- Consider wearing a safety vest to enhance visibility.

Visitor Health

If you are feeling unwell, you should postpone your visit to another day. Individuals with symptoms like gastrointestinal illness, vomiting, fever, cough, or headache should not enter a packinghouse (Figure 1). Ill individuals may carry microorganisms that pose a risk of contaminating produce with organisms capable of causing foodborne illness. This precaution is crucial to maintaining a hygienic environment and ensuring the integrity of the food supply chain. Additionally, individuals with any cuts, sores, or open wounds should make sure they are properly covered with a clean, waterproof bandage to prevent potential contamination.



Figure 1. Visitors should not enter packing areas if experiencing any of the symptoms listed above. Image created in Canva by C. Murphy.



Handwashing

Handwashing is a critical step in ensuring both personal and produce safety in packinghouse environments. All visitors should wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before entering the facility. It is also necessary to wash hands after using the restroom and after eating or smoking. By following proper handwashing procedures, which include scrubbing hands for at least 20 seconds with running water and soap, rinsing thoroughly, and drying with a clean, disposable paper towel, visitors can help minimize the risk of introducing harmful pathogens to the produce or into the environment.

Forklift Traffic

In a fast-paced packinghouse, there can be a lot of forklift traffic. One of the most important things to remember when visiting a packinghouse is to be aware of forklift activity around you. The operators are focused on their tasks; therefore, as a visitor, it is your responsibility to stay clear of their path. Always look both ways before crossing main pathways to guarantee your safety while walking through the facility.

Hazard and Risk Identification

Visitors to a packinghouse may not possess the same level of hazard awareness as daily workers. Understanding the distinction between a hazard, which is something that has the potential to cause harm, and a risk, which is the likelihood of that hazard causing harm, is crucial. In many packinghouses, water is used to facilitate the movement of fruit along the production line, resulting in

wet floors that pose a hazard. While this hazard typically presents a low risk, the wet surfaces can be slippery, thereby increasing the risk of injury from slips and falls. It is important to stick to designated walkways and avoid stepping on or near unfamiliar equipment or obstacles like fruit, produce bins, and machinery. Reading and adhering to posted signs regarding safety guidelines and equipment operation is also essential for visitor safety in such environments (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Examples of signs within produce packinghouses. Photos by C. Murphy.

Communication

Always communicate with the packinghouse to confirm a visiting schedule. Follow all instructions provided and show respect toward employees and equipment. Do not hesitate to ask questions about equipment functionality, the packing process, or any other questions.

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