What’s wrong with this picture?

You may think you’re doing everything right when it comes to food safety in your store, but there’s no such thing as being too safe.

By Alicia Andrich | Illustration by Tyson Smith
Robert Hart has been a public health inspector for almost 30 years. That means he's spent more time than most in grocery stores, checking to make sure that (among other things) the freezers are deeply chilling, staff are following the prescribed rules of food handling and mice haven't sabotaged the storage room. It's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it.

But Hart needs to eat like the rest of us. And that means visits to the supermarket as a "civilian." No clipboard or flashy ID to indicate his designation as a certified public health inspector. At these times, he's simply Joe Shopper. But during one such trip, Hart couldn't just stand by when he noticed an all-too-common and potentially dangerous infraction. He had just been handed raw chicken breasts from a gloved employee from behind the counter. Right after, the clerk headed to the deli department to take an order of cold cuts from another customer. Before doing so, the staffer diligently put on a new pair of gloves.

To Hart's trained eye, though, there'd been a huge oversight. The clerk hadn't washed her hands. As the chicken-soiled gloves were removed, campylobacter bacteria (a major cause of food poisoning) that may have been present in the raw poultry might have transferred to the employee's bare hands. That could then contaminate the outside of the next gloves the clerk put on. If the bacteria transferred to the cold cuts, the customer could have gotten very sick. Hart asked to speak to the manager and explained that the missed hand-washing step in this seemingly innocent routine could have led to a serious case of cross-contamination.

Did Hart overreact? No way. Food safety has, in recent years, become a hot-button topic for shoppers. Mad cow disease, avian flu and the 2008 listeriosis outbreak that was linked to 23 deaths have all added to the fear. So, too, has the organic and local food movement, which has shoppers asking which farm
FOOD SAFETY: What shoppers want to know

When you envision food safety, you probably think about keeping meats cold and the deli counter gleaming.

But customers these days are also obsessed with where their food comes from. For them, safety starts with the growing conditions, says Mike Horwich, director of food protection and enforcement at the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture.

Take biosolids, for instance. They are the treated human waste culled from sewage treatment plants. The end sludgy materials can be used as fertilizer on farms. More inquisitive shoppers may want to know which products are grown in biosolids, so ask suppliers for such details about the background of their foods.

Fruit and veggies from faraway lands are another topic of concern. A customer who sees a product from South America, for instance, may search online to find out about agricultural practices. If they have doubts, they may ask you to verify the growing conditions. Whatever their question, it helps to keep in close contact with your suppliers to help bridge the information gap.

their pint of blueberries came from and whether that slab of beef had grazed on open farmland or was squished in a pen before its untimely demise (albeit for a tasty cause).

Yes, food safety messups have, to date, been largely tethered to manufacturers and government. So why should retailers pay more attention to this issue than they already do? Here’s why: when it comes to food safety, consumers trust you the least.

For proof, just look at Nielsen’s 2009 survey on the Canadian perspective on food safety. Asked who they trust the most when a food safety scare arises, Canadians put their faith in government first (36%), followed by the media (29%). Food manufacturers were third place, with 22%. Food retailers were dead last, with a mere 13%.

It’s a remarkable factoid given the death tolls attributed to manufacturers (Maple Leaf) and government. (Remember the Walkerton tragedy in Ontario a decade ago when E. coli-contaminated drinking water killed seven people?) Michael English, business consultant for consumer products at Deloitte in Toronto, has a hypothesis as to why retailers scored so low. The only interaction most consumers have with the food chain is at the grocery store. The in-store experience moulds their perception of food safety. "So if I go into a store and see a carton of milk that’s broken, does it mean the milk beside it is bad?" asks English. Probably not. "But consumers are really focused on an experience and they will associate that with the worst-case scenario, which right now is food safety."

How can grocers enhance customer confidence around food safety on their end? (You know, beyond obvious things like removing recalled products from store shelves quicker than you can say "refund.") As Hart, the health inspector, knows, grocers can take steps to make sure the food their customers buy is kept safe in the store. "Everybody is beginning to understand that there’s more education and training, so food safety is really not that difficult to do," says Hart, who is a municipal environmental health manager with Hamilton Public Health Services. "It’s a few basic, simple rules that you need to adhere to all the time."

What are those rules? We spoke to food safety experts to find out. The result is a set of practical tips for retailers to use every day in their stores:

Right into the danger zone

Remember the famous tune from Top Gun? The "Danger Zone" isn’t just for shooting down MiGs. It’s also a critical concept in the storage of cold and hot foods. Cold food is typically to be stored at four degrees Celsius or less; for hot food it’s above 60 degrees Celsius. "Anything stored between those temperatures is what we call the ‘danger zone,’" says Hart. Pathogens such as listeria can start to grow within that range.
Functioning thermometers are the best way to keep food out of the danger zone. Still, Lori Lucas, interim environmental health and prevention services supervisor in the County of Lambton’s community health services department in southwestern Ontario, has heard lots of excuses about thermometers breaking or falling to the bottom of coolers and out of sight. (Seems like the grocery industry’s equivalent to “The dog ate my homework.”) Don’t resort to gauging temperature by hand, she advises. The inside of a cooler that rises by a couple degrees still feels cold compared to the air temperature in the store. Temperature monitoring should be a high priority in any store, she says. For instance, get staff to regularly record unit temperatures in a logbook.

Leaving a sliding door open for too long also lets in warm air and throws off temperatures. When staff are restocking or taking out deli meat to slice, advise them to open and close the doors quickly. And avoid overcrowding open display coolers; the room temperature in the store may warm up the items at the very top.

**Cross-contamination: it’s everywhere**

Meat and deli departments in close proximity breed opportunities for cross-contamination between raw and ready-to-eat meats. Be mindful of shared surfaces and equipment, and keep tabs on staff volleying from the butcher side to the deli side. Also, make sure that knives and other utensils used in one department aren’t then used in the other. Danny Martin, supervisor of the environmental health division at Peel Public Health in Mississauga, Ont., suggests labelling or colour-coding which utensils are to be used with which types of meat so staff can easily spot the difference. If it’s not possible to keep items related to raw and ready-to-eat product separate, staff must follow proper cleaning and sanitizing protocols.

Lucas outlines the three-sink method: manual dishwashing first; then rinsing; then sanitizing.

Getting back to the glove issue, Lucas cautions that although the public feels “all warm and fuzzy” when they see a staffer wearing gloves rather than handling orders with bare hands, proper glove use involves several often skipped steps. Hands should be washed before putting on and after taking off gloves. “If an employee has dirty hands and they’re rifling to try to get gloves on, it’s not like they’re in a hospital where somebody’s helping them,” she says. Plus, if a glove-wearer fixes their visor or hair net or rubs their nose, there’s a risk of contamination.

As an employee changes tasks, he should always don a new pair of gloves. “A lot of times they’ll be arranging a platter, then they might go and ring in a customer at the cash, then come back,” says Hart. A safer solution is to assign different staffers to separate tasks. If party trays need to be prepared, assign a couple of people to that task rather than multiple assignments, to decrease the chance of cross-contamination. Cross-contamination can also rear its ugly head around bulk bins. They should all have sneeze guards and tongs. “You don’t want people
sticking their hands in and squeezing the buns," says Hart. "Unlike fruit that you can wash when you get home, it's pretty hard to wash off the surface of a kaiser roll."

**Should that go in the fridge?**

Coils of kielbasa hanging from a hook over the deli are meant to attract customers. They may also attract suspicion from public health inspectors. Hart says store employees sometimes assume that if a meat product like pepperoni or salami is smoked or cured it doesn't need to be refrigerated. But the curing process may be used simply for flavour, not as a preservative. Once a meat is tested for things like its pH and water activity (which means how moist the product is and how much water is available for bacteria to grow), it may prove to be perishable—not shelf stable. "If you are leaving it out at room temperature and you do happen to get some bad bacteria into it, like some kind of salmonella, it could make people sick," says Hart. Always confirm with suppliers whether or not items are perishable.

Another thing about those sausages and pepperettes: "They shouldn't just be sitting on a counter where your customers can handle them. Someone could cough or sneeze on them and introduce something like staphylococcus," says Hart.

Over at the bakery, inspectors are on "perishable patrol" for cream- or cheese-filled goods. While some bakery staff protest that refrigerating certain products can ruin their texture, Hart cuts to the chase: "We just tell them, 'Sorry, safety has to trump the texture because you're really taking a chance if you leave the items unrefrigerated.' " He suggests putting a few display items out on the bakery counter for customers to look at, but not to eat. Keep the cakes for purchase in the cooler.

**Sick? Get outta here**

A nauseous employee is a no-no. Those who've been vomiting or had diarrhea should definitely stay home until they're symptom-free. Although staffers who don't get sick pay may want to drag their sick selves in for their shift, staying home is what's best. "This is a major issue," says Hart. "When we look at confirmed outbreaks, the majority in recent years have been norovirus outbreaks and they could so easily be prevented if people were just able to stay at home when they're ill."

A sick staffer could transfer bacteria to food they handle. When you're actually ill with diarrhea, you're shedding tons of viruses so it's not hard to get your hands contaminated in the bathroom. (Martin uses the term "fecally fingernails.") Remember, it doesn't take many viral particles to make someone sick. Even a little contamination can go a long way.

**Control those pesky pests**

If you've got a graveyard of old compressors or refrigerators in the back or keep lots of stock directly on the floor, you may as well put up a "Rodent Hotel" sign. Pests hide and nest in immobile objects, snacking on remnants like old produce left in display cases and contaminating food along the way.

Hart suggests using skids to raise items off the ground so they can be cleaned around. Also, thoroughly seal entranceways and windows and patch cracked walls. Monitoring and prevention is key, says Hart. "You may think you have everything covered, but if you aren't a 24-hour operation, who knows what's coming from under the counter that you didn't see in the daytime?"

An infestation of mice, rats or cockroaches poses more than just a health hazard. It can result in a store being shut down. That means lost business, plus unwanted publicity in the local newspaper. "Consumers have a lot of choices these days to shop and people in the food industry have to bring their best game to the table every day," says Martin.

Don't despair about the work involved in keeping food in your store safe. It's worth it. Martin says he's done at least 1,000 inspections at supermarkets, bakeries and delis over the years and he's thrilled that most stores are doing a good job. Last year, his department gave passing grades to more than 90% of the food premises they checked. Contrary to what some shoppers may believe, grocers are doing their part to keep the food system safe and prevent customers from getting sick.