



Updated February, 2019

**Foodborne Illness Investigation and Control Reference Manual**

**FOODBORNE ILLNESS INVESTIGATION AND CONTROL**

**REFERENCE MANUAL**

A publication of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health Bureau

of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences and Bureau of Environmental Health

Working Group on Foodborne Illness Control

# TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR THE INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION

Important Telephone Numbers

 MDPH Epidemiology Program

 MDPH Food Protection Program

 MDPH State Public Health Laboratory

Important Reference Documents (See links on page iv)

 (a) Summary of Reportable Diseases, Surveillance, and Isolation

 and Quarantine Requirements extracted from 105 CMR 300.00

 (b) Guide to Surveillance, Reporting and Control

 (c) Disease Fact Sheets

 (d) "MA Food Code," Regulation 105 CMR 590.000: Minimum

 Sanitation Standards for Food Establishments, Article X

 (e) 2013 Federal Food Code and 2015 Supplement to the 2013 Code

 (f) CIFOR: Guidelines for Foodborne Disease Outbreak Response

A.Purpose

B. MDPH Working Group on Foodborne Illness Control

C. Team Approach

D. Organization of this Manual

E. Acknowledgements

F. List of Acronyms

G. Glossary

H. List of Figures and Attachments

 I. Reference Manual Chapters

 J. Index

**EPIDEMIOLOGY PROGRAM**

(Bureau of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences)

**617-983-6800 (Regular and Emergency Number)**

Contact for technical assistance with the epidemiologic investigation such as obtaining medical and food histories, coordinating stool specimen submissions and developing questionnaires. On-site investigation assistance is often available for larger outbreaks. An epidemiologist is on-call for emergencies 24 hours per day, 7 days a week, 365 days per year at the above number.

**FOOD PROTECTION PROGRAM**

(Bureau of Environmental Health)

**617-983-6712**

Contact for policy and technical assistance with the environmental investigation such as conducting a HACCP risk assessment, initiating enforcement actions and collecting food samples. On-site investigation assistance is often available for larger outbreaks.

**For assistance with foodborne illness emergencies after business hours, call the Epidemiology Program at the number above.**

**STATE PUBLIC HEALTH LABORATORY**

(Bureau of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences)

**617-983-6201**

Contact for technical assistance with the collection protocol for food and clinical specimens and interpretation of laboratory results. **24/7 Laboratory Telephone: 617-590-6390**

**IMPORTANT REFERENCE DOCUMENTS (Updated October, 2018)**

The documents listed below are the major documents that should be referenced

when a foodborne illness is being investigated. Links updated October, 2018.

**Summary of Reportable Diseases, Surveillance, and Isolation and Quarantine**

**Requirements, extracted from 105 CMR 300.000:**

[**https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/07/xx/rdiq-reg-summary.pdf**](https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/07/xx/rdiq-reg-summary.pdf)

**Guide to Surveillance, Reporting and Control:**

[**https://www.mass.gov/handbook/guide-to-surveillance-reporting-and-control**](https://www.mass.gov/handbook/guide-to-surveillance-reporting-and-control)

**Disease Fact Sheets:**

[**http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/id/epidemiology/factsheets.html**](http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dph/programs/id/epidemiology/factsheets.html)

**"MA Food Code," Regulation 105 CMR 590.000: Minimum Sanitation Standards for Food Establishments, Article X:** [**https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/10/09/105cmr590.pdf**](https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/10/09/105cmr590.pdf)

**The 2013 FDA Food Code and 2015 Supplement to the 2013 Code are available on FDA’s website at:** [**https://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/RetailFoodProtection/FoodCode/ucm374275.htm**](https://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceRegulation/RetailFoodProtection/FoodCode/ucm374275.htm)

**CIFOR** (Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response): Guidelines for Foodborne Disease Outbreak Response - 2nd Edition and Industry Guidelines, plus other resources at [**http://cifor.us/**](http://cifor.us/)

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**Suggested Citation:**

Working Group on Foodborne Illness Control

*Foodborne Illness Investigation and Control Reference Manual*

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

[chapter, date of latest chapter revision]

**A. PURPOSE**

Foodborne illnesses are a continuing threat to the public's health. They cause illness, suffering, and death and they place an enormous financial burden on society. Although some foodborne illnesses have been controlled by modern advances, these are constantly emerging or re-emerging. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) places strong emphasis on improving the investigation and control of foodborne illness. This reference manual is part of the MDPH's focus on providing more trainings and technical assistance for local boards of health and health department staff (LBOH). The purpose of the manual is to guide LBOHs through foodborne illness investigation and control. It is designed as a comprehensive reference covering both epidemiologic and environmental aspects of a foodborne illness investigation, and emphasizes the practical and necessary features of investigation and control. Contained within the manual are basic information, guidelines, recommendations and regulatory requirements. While this manual is targeted to LBOHs, other health professionals can also use the information to facilitate understanding of how LBOHs operate, and how they, themselves, play a role in foodborne illness investigation and control. This 2nd Edition also focuses on meeting Standard #5 of the FDA's Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards as of 2015.

This manual is comprised of individual chapters addressing the different aspects of investigating and controlling foodborne illnesses. It has been specifically designed for online use so that each chapter is self-contained with emergency numbers and attachments appropriate to that chapter's content. However, chapters may include references to other chapters as appropriate.

This manual has also been designed so that individual chapters can be updated as needed, without updating the entire manual. The original revision date for all of the chapters is June, 2017. When accessing this manual online in the future, however, you may notice that particular chapters will have more current revision dates. Individual chapters can be printed if a hard copy would be more useful to your particular board's or department's needs. We encourage you to check online, however, when using your printed copy, to make sure that you have the most current revisions.

**B. THE WORKING GROUP ON FOODBORNE ILLNESS CONTROL**

The MDPH Working Group on Foodborne Illness Control (WGFIC) is comprised of members of the Bureau of Environmental Health's Food Protection Program (FPP) and the Bureau of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences (BIDLS) Epidemiology Program, Office of Integrated Surveillance and Informatics Services (ISIS), and the Massachusetts State Public Health Laboratory (MA SPHL). The group's mission is to identify and prevent foodborne illness through information exchange both within MDPH and among local partners, develop best practices in foodborne illness outbreak investigation, and share knowledge through presentations, educational materials and reports.

WGFIC's main functions are:

1) To respond to consumer complaints regarding foodborne illness,

2) To assist and/or train LBOHs in investigations of foodborne illness or outbreaks,

3) To identify causes of outbreaks through environmental investigations, laboratory analysis and epidemiologic analysis,

4) To track cases and complaints linked to the consumption of food, and

5) To make recommendations and take necessary steps for the prevention and control of foodborne illness.

**C. TEAM APPROACH**

Investigation of an outbreak of foodborne illness is a team effort in which each member plays an essential role. The collaborative nature of WGFIC has contributed to improved communication between the programs at MDPH and a better understanding of what is happening throughout Massachusetts in regard to foodborne illness. Collaboration and close working relationships with LBOHs who address foodborne illness will be emphasized throughout the manual. Increased understanding of others' responsibilities and even cross-training can result in improved local foodborne illness investigation and control programs. LBOHs are encouraged to work closely with MDPH on all foodborne illness investigations, and particularly on outbreaks, to facilitate a shorter timeline between notification and the institution of prevention and control measures.

**D. ORGANIZATION OF THIS MANUAL**

**Chapter I: History and Trends** presents an overview of the history and trends of foodborne illness for the United States and Massachusetts.

**Chapter II: Disease Characterization and Pathogenesis** provides an overview of the pathogenesis of foodborne illness and discusses how foodborne disease is classified. It also contains descriptions of causative agents and associated illnesses. The focus of the manual is on illness caused by three common microbial food hazards: viruses, bacteria and parasites. Other less common etiological agents such as molds and chemicals are referenced, but not specifically addressed.

**Chapter III: Foodborne Illness Surveillance** explains the concepts of disease surveillance, describes the methods by which foodborne illness data are collected and used, and addresses important data collection issues.

**Chapter IV: Investigating Foodborne Illnesses and Outbreaks** focuses on the responsibilities of LBOHs in the investigation and the use of the Enteric Disease Reporting Form along with the Foodborne Illness Complaint Worksheet. A summary of sequential steps in an outbreak investigation is included as an attachment.

**Chapter V: The Epidemiologic Investigation** explains the steps taken to determine the source(s) of the illness(s) and the way in which information is analyzed to assist in prevention and control measures.

**Chapter VI: Electronic Reporting and Surveillance System (MAVEN)** describes the very sophisticated communication system used in Massachusetts allowing LBOHs, members of WGFIC, as well as other hospitals and laboratories to communicate information regarding foodborne illness more rapidly.

**Chapter VII: Conducting an Environmental Investigation** is a detailed description of the role of the LBOH in working with ill individuals reported to them; conducting a HACCP risk inspection of the suspect facility; and implementing prevention and control measures.

**Chapter VIII: When There Are Sick Employees** is a detailed description of how LBOHs should handle sick employees at a suspect facility; work with the Person-in-Charge to implement exclusions and restrictions and subsequent reinstatement; and includes a detailed section on hepatitis A.

**Chapter IX: Working with the State Public Health Laboratory** describes the following: the role of the laboratories; what samples are tested; how samples should be submitted; and how the reports should be interpreted.

**Chapter X: Summarizing the Investigation** describes the contents of a complete report, summarizing all of the steps taken from beginning to end of a foodborne illness investigation.

**E. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Funding for this project was provided by the Federal Food and Drug Administration through a grant awarded to the Food Protection Program, and to a Voluntary National Retail Food Regulatory Program Standards grant awarded to the Melrose/Wakefield Health Departments, and through funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for Infectious Diseases Cooperative Agreement.

The Working Group on Foodborne Illness Control wishes to thank all the individuals who served as contributors and reviewers in the development and completion of the 1st edition of this manual, as well as the following individuals for their work in the production of this 2nd edition:

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Many thanks to the directors, inspectors and public health nurses from the following communities who reviewed this 2nd edition: Malden, Melrose, Medford, Newton, Peabody, Wakefield, Winchester and Westford.

**F. LIST OF ACRONYMS**

aw Water Activity

AIDS Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

AR Attack Rate

ASTHO Association of State and Territorial Health Officials

BIDLS Bureau of Infectious Disease and Laboratory Sciences

CD Communicable Disease

CDC U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CIDT Culture Independent Diagnostic Test(s)

CMR Code of Massachusetts Regulations

CCP Critical Control Point

CSTE Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists

EIA Enzyme Immuno-Assay

ELR Electronic Laboratory Reporting

FDA U.S. Food and Drug Administration

FPP MDPH Food Protection Program

GI Gastrointestinal

HACCP Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point

HAV Hepatitis A Virus

HRA HACCP Risk Assessment

HUS Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome

IG Immune Globulin

I&Q Isolation and Quarantine

ISIS Office of Integrated Surveillance and Informatics Services

LBOH Local Board of Health(s)

LIMS Laboratory Information Management System

MDPH Massachusetts Department of Public Health

MGL Massachusetts General Law

MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report

O&P Ova and Parasites

PCR Polymerase Chain Reaction

PFGE Pulsed-Field Gel Electrophoresis

PIC Person in Charge

PSP Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning

SLI State Laboratory Institute

SPHL (Massachusetts) State Public Health Laboratory

STD Sexually Transmitted Disease

STEC Shiga Toxin-producing *Escherichia coli*

TCS Time/Temperature Control for Safety Food

USDA U.S. Department of Agriculture

VNA Visiting Nurse Association

WGFIC Massachusetts Working Group on Foodborne Illness Control

WGS Whole Genome Sequencing

**G. GLOSSARY**

**Anaerobic.** Able to live without oxygen.

**Aseptic technique.** Method used to prevent contamination in procedures where sterility is necessary.

**Asymptomatic.** Without symptoms.

**Attack rate.** The proportion of a well-defined population that develops illness over a limited period of time, as during an epidemic or outbreak. It is often expressed as a percentage. The difference between attack rates for those exposed and not exposed to a particular food provides important clues in the investigation of the etiology of an acute outbreak.

**aw** (water activity). See water activity.

**Bacteria.** One-celled living microorganisms with a cell wall.

**Bioassay.** The determination of the strength of a drug or substance by comparing its effect on a live animal or an isolated organ preparation to the effect of a standard preparation.

**Carrier.** An individual who can tolerate an infection so as not to become ill, yet is able to transmit the disease-causing organism to cause infection and illness in others.

**Case or Patient.** One who is ill, infected, injured or diagnosed with a reportable disease or injury; in a foodborne illness outbreak, an individual or diseased person or animal having specific clinical, laboratory and epidemiologic characteristics.

**Colonization.** Multiplication of a microorganism, on or within, a host without causing cellular injury. A colonized host can serve as a source of infection.

**Communicability (Period of).** The interval during which a person or animal that has an infection is a potential source of infection.

**Comminuted.** Reduced in size by methods including chopping flaking, grinding or mincing. Includes fish or meat products that are reduced in size and restructured or reformulated such as gefilte fish, gyros, ground beef and sausage; and a mixture of two or more types of meat that have been reduced in size and combined, such as sausages made from two or more meats.

**Contact.** A person or animal that has been in such association with an infected person or animal, or a contaminated environment, as to have had exposure capable of transmitting the infection to that person.

**EIA (Enzyme Immuno-Assay).** A laboratory method used to detect a target (can be DNA, RNA, antigen, antibody or toxin) in a clinical specimen or environmental sample.

**Endemic.** The expected, or the usual, prevalence of a disease or infectious agent in human populations within a given geographic area.

**Enteric.** Pertaining to the gastrointestinal tract.

**Epidemic.** A disease occurring in a greater-than-usual number of individuals in a community at the same time.

**Epidemic curve.** A graph that depicts the association of the time of onset of illness of all cases that are associated with the outbreak. It helps in determining whether the outbreak originated from a common source or from person to person spread.

**Epidemiologist.** A person who applies epidemiologic principles and methods to the prevention and control of disease.

**Epidemiology.** Study of the distribution and determinants of health-related states and events in populations, and the application of this study to the control of health problems.

**Etiology.** The cause of a disease (i.e., type of bacteria, virus, toxin, etc.)

**Fecal-oral transmission.** Describes the spread of pathogens from the feces of a human (or animal) into the mouth of a person, which can occur via fecal contamination of the food or water supply, or by hand-to-mouth transmission following inadequate handwashing after touching contaminated items.

**Foodborne disease.** Illness resulting from ingestion of contaminated food or water.

**Foodborne infection.** An illness caused by ingestion of food or water contaminated by viruses, bacteria or parasites. Either they invade and multiply in the intestinal mucosa and/or other tissues or, in addition, they then release a toxin that causes damage or interferes with normal function.

**Foodborne intoxication.** An illness caused by ingestion of food already contaminated by a toxin, such as certain bacteria, poisonous chemicals or natural toxins.

**Foodborne pathogens.** Microorganisms causing illness through the ingestion of food.

**Genus.** In biology, a category of classification for living organisms. This group is between the species and the family.

**Guillain-Barre' Syndrome.** Nerve damage resulting in varying degrees of paralysis or weakness, usually reversible.

**HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point).** HACCP is a concept which permits a systematic approach to the identification and assessment of hazards and risks associated with the manufacture, distribution and use of a food product, as well as the definition of preventive measures for their control.

**Hermetically-sealed.** Airtight.

**Host.** Organisms, including man, that are capable of being infected by a specific agent (e.g., a person infected by contaminated food.)

**HUS (Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome).** An acute condition consisting of anemia due to red blood cell damage, low platelet count, bleeding tendency and kidney damage.

**Hypothesis.** An unproven assertion or statement, based on available information, which commonly deals with the identity of an etiologic agent, the source of infection and the mode of transmission. Its role is to provide a rational basis for further investigation.

**Imminent health hazard.** A significant threat or danger to health that is considered to exist when there is sufficient evidence to show that a product, practice, circumstance, or event creates a situation that requires immediate correction or cessation of operation to prevent injury based on the number of potential injuries and the nature, severity and duration of the anticipated injury.

**Immune globulin (IG).** A solution of antibodies that is effective in preventing certain diseases, such as hepatitis A, if given prior to exposure or in the early incubation period after exposure to the hepatitis A virus.

**Immunity.** Possession of protective antibodies or cellular components sufficient to protect from infection and/or illness following exposure to an infectious agent. (See also Resistance.)

**Immunocompromised.** An immune system functioning in a less than optimum manner or at an overall reduced level.

**Incubation period.** Time from ingestion or other acquisition of a pathogen until symptoms occur in the human body.

**Infectivity.** The ability of an agent to infect a host.

**Infective dose.** The quantity of bacterial cells, viral particles, or parasitic cysts required to induce illness.

**Infectious period.** Time period during which one is capable of transmitting a disease to others.

**Invasive.** The ability of a microorganism to enter the body and to spread throughout the tissues.

**Investigations.** Studies conducted to identify the source of individuals' cases and the mode of the pathogen's transmission.

**Isolate.** (verb) To obtain a pure culture of an infectious agent, such as bacteria or viruses.

 (noun) A pure culture of an infectious agent; bacteria

**Isolation.** Separation, for the period of communicability, of infected persons from others in such places and under such conditions as will prevent the direct or indirect transmission of an infectious agent to susceptible people or to those who may spread the agent to others. This also applies to animals.

**MAVEN.** The Massachusetts Virtual Epidemiologic Network, MDPH's infectious disease surveillance and case management system.

**Microbial.** Relating to microorganisms (e.g., bacteria).

**Mucoid.** Mucus-like.

**Mucopurulent.** Consisting of pus and mucus.

**Outbreak or Cluster.** The occurrence in a community, facility, workplace or region of cases of an illness clearly in excess of the number of cases usually expected. The number of cases indicating an outbreak or cluster will vary according to the infectious agent or the site conditions/hazards, size and type of population exposed, previous experience or lack of exposure to the disease, and time and place of occurrence. Outbreaks or clusters are therefore identified by significant increases in the usual frequency of the disease in the same area, among the specified population, at the same season of the year.

**Parasite.** An organism living on or within an animal of another species, from which it obtains nutrients.

**Pasteurization.** The process of heating a fluid or food at a moderate temperature for a definite period of time in order to destroy undesirable bacteria without changing to any extent its chemical composition.

**Pathogen.** A microorganism capable of producing a disease.

**Pathogenic**. Productive of disease.

**Pathogenesis.** Origin and development of disease.

**Pathogenicity.** Capacity of an organism to cause disease.

**PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction).** A laboratory method used to amplify and detect DNA or RNA in a clinical specimen or environmental sample.

**pH.** An expression used to indicate the degree of acidity or alkalinity of a substance: pH 7 is neutral; acids have a pH of less than 7; bases have a pH more than 7.

**Plausible.** Having an appearance of truth or reason but usually open to question.

**Protozoa.** One cell organisms with cell nuclei and other structures.

**PulseNet.** The national molecular subtyping network for foodborne illness surveillance and outbreak detection. PulseNet is housed at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**Resistance.** The sum total of body mechanisms which interpose barriers to the progress of invasion or multiplication of infectious agents or to damage by their toxic products. Immunity is that resistance usually associated with possessing antibodies or cells having a specific activity against the etiologic agent of an infectious disease. Passive immunity is attained either naturally by maternal transfer or artificially by introducing specific protective antibodies. Passive immunity is of brief duration. Active immunity is attained by infection, with or without symptoms, or by introducing certain fractions or products of the infectious agent or the agent itself in a killed, modified or variant form. Natural resistance is the ability to resist disease independently of antibodies or a specific cellular response. It commonly rests in anatomic, cellular or physiologic characteristics of the host. It may be genetic or acquired, permanent or temporary.

**Quarantine.** Restricting the freedom of movement of well persons or domestic animals who have been exposed to a communicable disease for a period of time relating to the usual incubation period of the disease, in order to prevent effective contact with those not so exposed (compare Isolation).

**Risk.** The likelihood of the occurrence of a hazard (e.g. illness).

**Septicemia.** Presence of pathogenic bacteria in the blood. If allowed to progress, the organisms may multiply and cause an overwhelming infection and death.

**Sequelae.** A condition that may be of long duration following, and resulting from, a disease.

**Serotype.** In microbiology, a microorganism determined by the kinds and combinations of specific chemical structures that interact with specific antibodies.

**Spore.** A reproductive cell usually unicellular, produced by plants, some protozoa, and certain bacteria. The spores of bacteria are difficult to destroy because they are very resistant to heat and require prolonged exposure to high temperatures to destroy them.

**Species (spp.).** In biology, a category of classification for living organisms. This group is just below genus.

**Strain.** In microbiology, a division of serotype as determined by PFGE or WGS.

**Surveillance of Disease.** Monitoring the occurrence and spread of disease and indications of such occurrence and spread.

**Toxigenic.** The ability of an organism to elicit toxic symptoms.

**Toxic Dose.** The quantity of toxin required to induce illness.

**Toxin.** Proteins or conjugated protein substances which can be lethal to other organisms. They are produced by some higher plants, certain animals and pathogenic bacteria.

**Virulence.** Relative power and degree of pathogenicity possessed by organisms that produce disease.

**Viruses.** A minute organism too small to be seen with a light microscope yet visible with an electron microscope. It is entirely dependent on living cells for its metabolic and reproductive needs.

**Water activity (aw).** A unit of measurement reflecting the amount of moisture that is readily available for the metabolic activity of microorganisms. A reduction of water availability will reduce microbial proliferation.

**H. LIST OF FIGURES AND ATTACHMENTS (Updated October, 2018)**

Figure 1-1 Factors Associated with the Increase in Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Diseases

Figure 1-2 Data from FoodNet on Progress Towards 2020 Goals

Figure 1-3 Outbreaks Reported in the U.S., 1973-2010

Figure 1-4 Number of multi-person complaints received by WGFIC, by year, 2006-2015

Figure 1-5 Number of single person complaints received by WGFIC, by year, 2006-2015

Figure 1-6 Total number of people reported ill in all complaints to WGFIC, by month, 2015

Figure 1-7 Percent of complaints in 2015 by diagnosed disease categories

Figure 1-8 Percent of complaints in 2015 by specific diagnoses of bacterial diseases

Figure 1-9 Confirmed cases of *Salmonella* infection reported to MDPH, by month, 2015

Figure 1-10 Confirmed cases of Campylobacter infection reported to MDPH by month, 2015

Figure 1-11 Confirmed & probable cases of Campylobacter infection reported to MDPH by month, 2015

Figure 1-12 STEC, Salmonella, Campylobacter reportable cases by year 2009 - 2015

Figure 1-13 Confirmed cases of Vibrio infection reported to MDPH, by species and year, 2009 - 2015

Figure 2-1 Classification of *Escherichia coli* Associated with Diarrhea

Figure 3-1 Important Points Regarding Confidentiality

Figure 4-1 Guidelines for Determining Suspect Foods

Figure 5-1 Example of a Line List

Figure 5-2 Point-Source Outbreak Epidemic Curve

Figure 5-3 Propagated or Person-to-Person Source Outbreak Epidemic Curve

Figure 5-4 Continuous Common-Source Epidemic Curve

Figure 6-1 MAVEN Navigation Bar

Figure 6-2 MAVEN Dashboard

Figure 6-3 MAVEN Workflows

Figure 6-4 MAVEN Event Summary

Figure 7-1 Steps in a HACCP Risk Assessment

Figure 7-2 Manufactured Product Identification

Figure 7-3 Minimum Cooking Food Temperatures

Figure 7-4 Minimum Food Temperatures for Reheating & Hot-holding

Figure 7-5 Emergency Closure Order

Figure 8-1 Questions to Ask Employee and/or PIC

Figure 8-2 Results Possible When Testing for Antibody Against HAV

Figure 9-1 Tests Performed on Fecal Specimens

Figure 9-2 Sample Specimen Bottle Label

Figure 9-3 Food Sampling Equipment to Have On-hand

Figure 10-1 Foodborne Illness Outbreak Investigation Report Outline

Attachment 4-1 Summary of Sequential Steps in the Investigation of Foodborne Illness

 Complaints and Outbreaks

Attachment 4-2 Enteric Disease Reporting Form

Attachment 4-3 Diseases Reportable by Health Care Providers

Attachment 4-4 Foodborne Illness Complaint Worksheet

Attachment 4-5 Onset & Predominant Symptoms Associated with Selected Foodborne

 Organisms and Toxins

Attachment 5-1 Three Sample Questionnaires

Attachment 7-1 Equipment List

Attachment 7-2 Food Inspection Report Form

Attachment 7-3 Effects of pH

Attachment 7-4 Effects of Water Activity

Attachment 7-5 Blank HACCP Risk Assessment Form

Attachment 7-6 Instructions for Completing the HACCP Risk Assessment Form

Attachment 7-7 Completed HACCP Risk Assessment Form

Attachment 7-8 Management of Food Safety Practices

Attachment 7-9 The Process Approach

Attachment 7-10 Traceback Methodology

Attachment 7-11 Food Employee Reporting Agreement

Attachment 7-12 NEARS Establishment Observations Checklist

Attachment 8-1 Employee Health Guidance Document

Attachment 8-2 Handwashing Education Poster

Attachment 8-3 Sample Order Letter for Submission of Stool Sample

Attachment 8-4 Sample Public Notice

Attachment 8-5 Sample Press Release

Attachment 8-6 Hepatitis A Report Form

Attachment 8-7 Vomiting and Diarrheal Clean-up Policy Template

Attachment 9-1 Instructions for Stool Collection for Norovirus Testing

Attachment 9-2 SS-SLI-1-13 (Bacterial Stool Specimen)

Attachment 9-3 Environmental Sample Submission Form

Attachment 9-4 Chemical Exposure Clinical Specimen Submission Form

Attachment 9-5 Sample Laboratory Reports

Attachment 10-1 Example #1 Outbreak Report

Attachment 10-2 Example #2 Outbreak Report

Attachment 10-3 Example #3 Outbreak Report

**I. REFERENCE MANUAL CHAPTERS**

**Chapter I: History and Trends** 1-1

 A. Background on Foodborne Illness 1-2

 B. A National Overview of Foodborne Illness 1-2

 C. A Massachusetts Overview of Foodborne Illness 1-4

**Chapter II: Disease Characterization and Pathogenesis** 2-1

A. Characteristics of Viruses, Bacteria and Parasites 2-2

 1. Viruses 2-2

 2. Bacteria 2-2

 3. Parasites 2-2

 B. Classification of Foodborne Illness 2-3

 1. Foodborne Infection 2-3

 2. Foodborne Intoxication 2-4

 C. Clinical Features of Foodborne Illness 2-5

 1. Transmission of Pathogens 2-5

 2. Recognizing Foodborne Illness 2-6

 3. High-Risk Populations 2-6

 4. Infective or Toxic Dose 2-7

 D. The Carrier State 2-8

**Chapter III: Foodborne Illness Surveillance** 3-1

 A. Overview and Purpose of Surveillance 3-2

 1. Pathogen-specific Surveillance 3-2

 2. Notifications or Complaints 3-2

 3. Syndromic Surveillance 3-2

 B. Historical Development of Surveillance 3-3

 C. Information You Need to Collect 3-4

 1. Descriptive Information 3-4

 2. Investigational Findings 3-4

 3. Your Surveillance System 3-4

 D. Reporting Issues: Timeliness, Priorities and Confidentiality 3-5

 1. Timeliness 3-5

 2. Priorities 3-5

 3. Confidentiality 3-5

 E. Limitations of Data

 1. Under-Reporting and Incomplete Data 3-6

 2. Lack of Representativeness of Reported Cases 3-6

 3. Changing Case Definitions 3-7

**Chapter IV: Investigating Foodborne Illnesses and Outbreaks** 4-1

A. Responsibilities of the Local Board of Health 4-2

 B. The Enteric Disease Reporting Form 4-2

 1. Onset of Illness 4-2

 2. Incubation Period 4-3

 3. Exposure History 4-3

 4. Occupation 4-3

 C. The Foodborne Illness Complaint Worksheet 4-3

 1. Collecting Information 4-4

 2. Laboratory Diagnosis 4-4

 3. Food Consumption History 4-4

 4. Accuracy of Recording 4-4

 5. File and Communicate 4-4

 D. Determining the Validity of Complaints 4-5

 E. Foodborne Illness in Private Homes 4-6

**Chapter V: The Epidemiologic Investigation** 5-1

 A. What is Epidemiology? 5-2

 B. Conducting an Epidemiologic Investigation 5-2

 C. Steps in an Epidemiologic Investigation 5-3

 1. Confirm the Existence of an Epidemic or Outbreak 5-3

 2. Confirm the Diagnosis 5-4

 3. Determine the Number of Cases 5-4

 4. Orient the Data in Terms of Time, Person and Place 5-6

 5. Develop a Hypothesis 5-8

 6. Compare the Hypothesis with Established Facts 5-8

 7. Execute Control and Preventive Measures 5-9

 8. Prepare a Written Report 5-9

**Chapter VI: Electronic Reporting and Surveillance System (MAVEN)** 6-1

 A. Background 6-2

 B. MAVEN Features 6-2

 1. A Person-Based System 6-2

 2. Quicker Notification, Investigation and Processing 6-2

 3. Dashboard 6-3

 4. Workflows 6-3

 5. Question Packages 6-4

 6. Creating Events 6-5

 7. Logging Out 6-5

 C. Lab Results 6-5

 D. Foodborne Illness Complaint Resources 6-6

 1. Dashboard Icons 6-6

 2. Foodborne Illness Complaint Worksheet 6-6

 3. Creating a New Foodborne Illness Complaint Event 6-6

 E. FBI Question Packages with LBOH Access 6-7

 1. Administrative 6-7

 2. Complaint Information 6-7

 3. Food History 6-7

 4. Adding Notes 6-7

 5. Unloading or Closing an Event 6-7

 F. Reports Available Through MAVEN 6-7

**Chapter VII: Conducting an Environmental Investigation**  7-1

A. Being Prepared for an Environmental Investigation 7-2

 1. Knowledge 7-2

 2. Communication 7-2

 3. Equipment and Forms 7-2

 B. Sample Collection: Food and Enteric 7-3

 C. Background Information for the HACCP Risk Assessment 7-3

 1. What is HACCP? 7-3

 2. Applied Food Microbiology 7-3

 3. High-Risk Factors in Food Preparation 7-4

 D. Application of HACCP Principles 7-5

 Step 1: Identify Ingredients, Weight/Volume 7-6

 Step 2: Identify Food Handling Procedures at Each Step 7-7

 Step 3: Identify Potential Hazards and Critical Control Points 7-7

 Step 4: Identify Violations and Initiate Corrective Actions 7-15

 Step 5: Verify Corrective Actions Have been Undertaken 7-17

 E. National Environmental Assessment Reporting System (NEARS) 7-17

**Chapter VIII: When There Are Sick Food Employees** 8-1

 A. Local Board of Health Responsibility 8-2

 B. Definition of a Food Employee 8-2

 C. What to Do if You Discover an Ill Food Employee? 8-3

 1. Confirm the Illness 8-3

 2. Exclude/Restrict the Food Employee 8-3

 3. Identify and Dispose of Contaminated Food 8-3

 4. Interview and Educate Other Food Employees 8-4

 5. Testing All Food Employees in Outbreak Situations 8-4

 6. If Applicable, Notify the Public 8-4

 D. Specific Disease Control Measures 8-4

 E. HAV Control Measures 8-5

 F. Recommended Procedure for Hepatitis A Suspect Case Investigation 8-6

 1. Confirm the Case 8-6

 2. Determine the Period of Infectivity 8-7

 3. Report to MDPH 8-7

 4. Exclude the Food Employee 8-7

 5. Inspect the Food Establishment 8-7

 6. Immunize Contacts with Hepatitis A Vaccine or IG. 8-8

 7. Assess the Likelihood of Transmission to Patrons 8-8

 8. If Applicable, Notify the Public 8-8

 9. Maintain Surveillance 8-8

 10. Take Steps for Prevention 8-8

 G. Hepatitis A Vaccine 8-9

**Chapter IX: Working with the State Public Health Laboratory** 9-1

**About the State Public Health Laboratory** 9-2

**Enteric (Stool) Samples** 9-2

 A. What is accepted for Testing? 9-2

 B. Collection Kits for Bacterial Stool Specimens 9-3

 C. Collection Kits for Norovirus Stool Specimens and Submission 9-3

 D. When to Collect Clinical Specimens 9-3

 E. How Much to Collect 9-3

 F. Label Each Specimen Bottle 9-3

 G. Complete General Specimen Submission Form (SS-SLI-1-13) 9-4

 H. Packaging 9-5

 I. Delivery 9-5

 J. Reporting Results 9-5

 K. Stool Specimen Testing Turnaround Times 9-5

 L. Culture-Independent Diagnostic Tests (CIDT) 9-5

 M. Special Testing 9-6

 1. Ova and parasites 9-6

 2. Viral Isolation 9-6

 3. Urine 9-6

 4. Blood 9-6

 5. Botulism Testing 9-6

**Collecting Food Samples** 9-6

 A. Collect Samples Aseptically 9-7

 B. Transportation 9-7

 C. Labels 9-7

 D. Delivery 9-7

**Chemical Illness/Poisoning** 9-8

**Interpreting the Report Results** 9-8

 A. Bacterial Test Results 9-8

 B. Norovirus Test Results 9-9

 C. Chemical Test Results 9-9

**Chapter X: Summarizing the Investigation** 10-1

A. The Report 10-2

 B. Purpose of the Report 10-2

 1. A Document for Action 10-2

 2. A Record of Performance 10-2

 3. A Document for Potential Legal Issues 10-2

 4. An Enhancement of the Quality of the Investigation 10-2

 5. An Instrument to Present Control and Preventive Measures 10-2

 C. Outbreak Report Format 10-3

 D. Distributing the Report 10-5

**J. INDEX (By Chapter-Page)**

**A**

anaerobic packaging 7-14

**B**

bacteria 2-2

**C**

carrier state characteristics 2-8

case definitions 3-7

chemical illness/poisoning 9-8

CIDT 9-5

confidentiality 3-5

corrective actions 7-15

critical control point 7-7

cross-contamination 7-9

**D**

data limitations 3-6

determining suspect foods 4-4

disease control measures 8-4

**E**

emergency closure 7-16

enteric disease report form 4-2

enteric kits 8-4, 9-3

epidemic 5-3

epidemic curve 5-6

epidemiology 5-2

epidemiological reports 10-2

*Escherichia coli* classification 2-4

estimates of foodborne illness 1-2

exclusion of food employees 8-3

exposure history 4-3

**F**

food consumption history 4-4

FBI in private homes 4-6

FBI complaint worksheet 4-3

foodborne infection 2-3

foodborne intoxication 2-4

food handler definition 4-3

food employee definition 8-2

FoodNet 1-2

food sample collection 9-6

food sample equipment 9-8

**G**

**H**

HACCP risk assessment 7-3

hepatitis A control measures 8-5

hepatitis A vaccine 8-6, 8-9

HUS 2-4

hypothesis 5-8

**I**

immune globulin 8-8

incubation period 4-3

investigation priorities 3-5

investigation, epidemiologic 5-2

investigation, sequential steps 4-2

**J**

**K**

**L**

Lab rejection criteria 9-4

Lab testing, special 9-6

Lab reports 9-8

line list 5-4

**M**

manufactured product identification 7-6

marine toxins 2-5

MAVEN, create events 6-5

MAVEN, dashboard 6-3

MAVEN, LBOH access 6-7

**N**

natural toxicant 7-9

NEARS 7-17

norovirus specimen kits 9-3

NORS 1-3

**O**

outbreak 5-3

outbreak, point-source 5-6

outbreak, propagated 5-7

outbreak, continuous-common 5-7

outbreak report distribution 10-5

outbreak report format 10-3

**P**

parasites 2-2

pathogen-specific surveillance 3-2

poisoning, chemical 9-8

poisoning, marine 2-5

probability of infection 2-7

PulseNet 1-3

**Q**

questionnaire/survey 5-5

**R**

restrictions of food employees 8-3

**S**

Shattuck, Lemuel 3-3

Snow, John 5-2

syndromic surveillance 3-2

surveillance, history 3-3

surveillance system 3-4

survey/questionnaire 5-5

**T**

TCS foods 7-3

temperatures, cooking 7-11

temperatures, reheating 7-13

testing for HAV 8-7

toxin-mediated infection 2-3

**U**

**V**

validity of complaints 4-5

viruses 2-2

**W**

WGFIC 1-4

**X**

**Y**

**Z**