

Who determines where physicians and other health care workers can eat or drink while at work?



DEBUNKING THE MYTH

Neither The Joint Commission, nor the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), have specific standards that determine locations where employees can or cannot have food or beverages in a medical outpatient or hospital setting. Rather, The Joint Commission requires that health care organizations follow licensure requirements, laws, and regulations, including OSHA's Bloodborne Pathogens Standard.¹⁻⁴ OSHA prohibits consuming or storing food in areas where blood or other potentially infectious or toxic materials are located or stored, including refrigerators/freezers, cabinets, shelves, and counters.¹

BACKGROUND

Physicians and other health care workers frequently go long hours between meals or breaks and often need to eat and drink at their desk or work area. There are common misconceptions about where physicians and other health care workers can have food or beverages.

Additional information

Health care services are provided in a variety of settings, each with different types of risks, so there is not one single standard that applies to all health care environments. Health care workers face numerous safety and health hazards, including potential exposure to bloodborne pathogens.²

OSHA's Bloodborne Pathogens Standard explicitly prohibits the consumption of food and beverages in areas that exposure or potential exposure to blood or other potentially infectious material takes place, or where the potential for contamination of work surfaces exists, or any area exposed to a toxic material.¹ For example, if laboratory specimens are handled in the area in question, OSHA prohibits food and drinks, as contamination might occur. OSHA requires that organizations establish a practice, based upon assessment of their particular circumstances and any controlling authority requirement.

As an employer, each health care organization has an obligation to assess and determine which locations are

safe from potential contamination, and which locations might have the potential for contamination.³ While OSHA standards set minimum safety and health requirements, they do not prohibit employers from adopting more stringent requirements. The employer should make these locations and relevant requirements known to all employees.

Employees may eat, drink, and store food and beverages in work areas where the employer has determined that there is NOT potential exposure to blood, bodily fluids, or other potentially infectious or potentially toxic material.

Key takeaway

To ensure clinical staff can comfortably attend to their own nutritional and hydration needs without unnecessarily disrupting their workflow or schedule, employers can allow flexibility in their policies regarding the consumption and storage of food and beverages in work areas.

Resources

- [OSHA Interpretation Letter](#): Requirements for Covered Beverages at Nurses' Stations. Accessed December 2024.
- [AMA News Story](#): Myth or fact? Doctors must take lunch in the break room. Accessed December 2024.
- [The Joint Commission March 2019 Perspectives Article](#): Clarifying Food and Drink Safety for Clinicians. Accessed December 2024.

References

1. OSHA. 1910.1030(d)(2)(ix)- Bloodborne Pathogens. Accessed December 5, 2024. [https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/interlinking/standards/1910.1030\(d\)\(2\)\(ix\)](https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/interlinking/standards/1910.1030(d)(2)(ix))
2. OSHA. OSHA Safety and Health Topics: Healthcare. OSHA. 2024. Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://www.osha.gov/healthcare>
3. Caporusso B. OSHA Interpretation Letter: Requirements for covered beverages at nurses' stations. OSHA. May 17, 2006. Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/standardinterpretations/2006-05-17-1>
4. The Joint Commission. Standards FAQs: Staff Food and Drink in Patient Care Areas. The Joint Commission. April 11, 2016. Accessed December 5, 2024. <https://www.jointcommission.org/https://www.jointcommission.org/standards/standard-faqs/ambulatory/environment-of-care-ec/000001219/>

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