



Safer food, better business

# Know Your Food!

In recent years, there has been a sharp rise in the number of incidents of food-borne illnesses (commonly referred to as food poisoning) reported in the UK. Nationwide outbreaks of food poisoning cases are now at a record-high since the UK government began keeping records in 1967, leading some food experts to declare that we are in the midst of a food contamination epidemic.

## **Facts about Food Contamination**

- Food contamination refers to the presence of harmful microorganisms in food
- Contamination can occur at any stage of the food cycle, from production through to distribution and sale
- Contaminated fresh food products are the main vehicle for spreading food-borne illnesses
- The most common, and most overlooked cause of food contamination occurs when toxins (germs) and bacteria are spread by touch, during later stages of food production
- From entering the supermarket, each product is touched by an average of 20 people until it is purchased, including both consumers and supermarket staff
- Checkout staff come into contact with several products a day, in addition to handling cash, and are not required to wear gloves
- Food is often placed directly onto conveyer belts, which are not regularly cleaned
- Consumers who touch products may not always have clean hands or may be ill themselves

Whilst food-borne illnesses are a common and costly public health issue, they are also largely preventable. The UK government has recently issued a public health warning, urging consumers to be extra vigilant about their food consumption. The following guidelines have been provided:

## **The Food Standards Agency's Top Tips for Avoiding Food Contamination**

1. Avoid purchasing products that are likely to have been frequently touched where possible
2. Always wash fresh food produce before consumption, even when packaged
3. Do not leave food products soaking for long periods in the same water -this only encourages the spread of bacteria and germs. Instead, use the tap to rinse each product separately
4. Avoid consuming food previously eaten by children and sharing food with young children
5. Always wash hands before and after eating