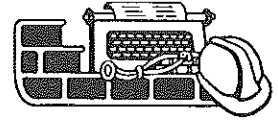


WOHRC FACT SHEET

WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RESOURCE CENTER



The Many Hazards of Waitressing

Waiting on table — one of the most traditional of women's jobs — is frequently hot, hurried and harried. But waitressing also involves health hazards that are not so easily apparent. The list ranges from air pollution to stress from sexual harassment. One recent survey of 130

occupations by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found that waiters and waitresses ranked second in mental health problems.

This is a breakdown of some of the outstanding hazards of the job, and some suggestions for dealing with them.

Lifting

Continual lifting of heavy trays of dishes can do damage to the muscles and ligaments of the back. Once a ligament is torn, it becomes scarred and is more prone to injury a second or a third time.

In lifting heavy objects, it is good to remember that your main strength lies between your shoulders and your knees. It may look elegant to carry a tray with one hand, shoulder level, but it is far safer to carry it inelegantly with two hands, waist-level, forearms close to the body and elbows down. Very heavy trays — those over 30 pounds — should be divided into more manageable parts or wheeled in on serving carts. Stands on which to rest trays while serving are also good, but there should be enough room around the tables so that these do not obstruct traffic flow.

When lifting a heavy tray, push up from the knees, using less easily injured leg, not back muscles. Lift the load slowly in a continuous movement, avoiding fast, jerky motions. Take the same care when putting it down.

Foot care

Waitresses should insist on comfortable, non-slip, low heeled shoes for work. High heels worn consistently can throw the body off-balance, contributing to fatigue, poor circulation, leg cramps and lower back pain.

Infections and skin diseases

Infections can arise from a variety of sources including dirty dishes, foods and contact with customers with colds and coughs. Some of these are hard to prevent, but maximum good housekeeping in restaurants can lessen sources of infection. If dishes and work surfaces are cleaned frequently, it is also possible to

avoid the use of strong cleaning solutions which can cause skin irritations.

A recent survey of leading occupations for skin disease found hotel and restaurant work placing sixth. In addition

to cleaning solutions, substances which can irritate the skin include some foods, such as fish, fruits, vegetables, cinnamon and vanilla which produce allergies in some people. Prolonged wetting of the hands can also lead to skin problems.

The best prevention for skin irritations is good hygiene — frequent washups with a mild soap, followed by use of a lanolin-containing lotion to replace natural skin oils and fats that may be lost.



Mary Sue Henfin

The health hazards of waitressing range from air pollution to stress.

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Temperature changes

Both too-hot and too-cold environments are sources of stress to the body. A waitress alternating between a hot kitchen and an air-conditioned dining

room may be subjecting herself to both of these.

Waitresses should work with other restaurant employees to ensure that kitchen temperatures and humidity be kept as low as possible. Many kitchen workers experience temperatures over 90 degrees F, a heat level that causes undue stress. Humidity from cooking steam and dishwashers only aggravates the problem. Hoods, exhaust fans and air ducts are recommended on and near vapor-producing appliances.

Air pollution

Air pollution in restaurants can come from:

- Carbon monoxide from cigarette smoke and improperly ventilated stoves, ovens and charcoal broilers. This chemical asphyxiant robs your body of needed oxygen and can cause headaches, nausea and dizziness.

- Carbon dioxide from insufficient



Burns are a constant hazard.

fresh air. This can also cause headaches, nausea and dizziness.

- Smoke and dusts from powders, burning substances and cigarettes. These can cause eye and throat irritation, coughing and, if particularly heavy, lung disease.

- Microbes (bacteria, fungi and viruses) from cooling water used in the ventilation system. These can cause colds, influenza and such infectious diseases as Legionnaires' Disease.

- Oxides of nitrogen from cooking gas and stoves can cause watery eyes and irritation of the respiratory system.

Most modern ventilation systems are designed not to remove pollutants, but simply to supply and circulate fresh air. They may reduce the level of pollution to safe levels, but only if functioning properly. Special scrubbers or filters may be needed if air pollution is high.

To find out if your workplace has adequate ventilation, check to make sure there are air ducts and vents in the walls or ceiling. You can tell if the system is on by holding a tissue up to one and seeing if it moves. The air exchange should be continuous, and the ducts unblocked by furniture.

Trips and falls

In hurrying to and from a work station there are innumerable opportunities for a waitress to slip, trip or fall. Some important places to check are:

- "In" and "Out" doors to kitchens. There should be two, and they should be clearly marked. If only one is available it should have safety glass panels that allow good visibility.

- Traffic lanes between tables and between table and kitchen should be wide enough to pass easily and kept free of wires and other obstructions.

- The floor surface should be slip resistant and kept clean and dry. Cracks and worn areas should be repaired before

they can cause an accident. The manufacturer's cleaning instructions should be followed so that cleaning methods do not reduce the safety of non-skid floors.

- Floor areas around sinks, dishwashing machines and vegetable preparation areas should have proper drainage. If they cannot be kept dry, special grid pattern floor mats should be used.

- Frequent spills should be investigated so that their causes can be prevented. Until then, they should be covered quickly with sawdust.

- Lighting should be good enough to prevent accidents. Lighting fixtures should be kept clean and in good working order. Dirty fixtures can filter out 20 percent of the light, and bulbs that are wearing out can also reduce light output.



Bettye Lane

Infections can arise from a number of sources including dirty dishes.

Burns and electrical wires

Electrical appliances, stoves and other hot surfaces present a constant hazard. Waitresses, like all other restaurant workers, should be instructed in the proper handling of appliances and cookware. They should never plug in any appliance with wet hands or while standing on a wet surface.

Particular care should be taken that appliances and electrical equipment, especially those found on metal counter tops, are properly grounded. These include toasters, blenders, hand-mixers, fans, refrigerators and radios. Many of these items are designed for household use and need special grounding when used in industry.

Extension cords, too, should be properly grounded and should be used only in temporary or emergency situations. They should never be substituted for permanent wiring.

First Aid and Fire Precautions

Every kitchen should have a properly stocked first aid box in the charge of a responsible person who has been trained

in first aid. In large establishments, the location of the nearest box and the name of the person responsible should be posted.

Every restaurant should have a fire certificate specifying means of escape in a fire. Fire exits should be clearly marked, and means of escape should be properly maintained and kept free of obstruction. Fire-fighting devices should be available, and regular fire drills should be held for all employees.

Stress

Workers with little control over their jobs suffer the greatest amount of stress, according to the latest findings by occupational health specialists. Waitresses rank high among women workers with such stress-related health problems as heart disease, hypertension and headaches.

Besides low control over their jobs, waitresses suffer stress from the pressure of the work, boredom with the routine, noise, low pay and little feedback to tell them that they are doing a good job. Night work and rotating shifts, especially if they disrupt social patterns, can cause digestive and sleep problems.

Sexual harassment is another stress that particularly affects waitresses. Employers may encourage this unwelcome attention from customers by forcing waitresses to wear revealing uniforms.

As sexual harassment has become a public issue, waitresses like other women workers are fighting back and winning significant victories. In 1980, waitresses in the Detroit airport brought suit against their employer on the grounds that their scanty uniforms subjected them not only to cold but to gross verbal and physical assault. The employer had to provide different uniforms.

Collective action does not always have to go as far as a court to win relief from stress. But only as waitresses, like other low-status workers, gain more control of their jobs will they be able to relieve many of the conditions that are dangerous to their health. □

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