

Latex, Vinyl, Or Soap?



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

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THE video was dark and grainy, the camera operator anonymous. But the clip, which appeared to show a customer at a popular downtown restaurant extracting a disposable glove from a plate of food, caused a small stir on Monday when a link to it was posted at eater.com, a blog that chronicles the New York dining scene.

After a series of restaurant closings by the city's health department, the amateur video raised new concerns about sanitation practices in restaurant kitchens. The very object that is supposed to keep diners safe from germs appeared to be a menace.

The unusual episode hinted at a larger problem. Twenty years after disposable gloves became common in restaurant kitchens, it is not clear



Photographs by Casey Kelbaugh for
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IS THE SOLUTION A PROBLEM?
Employees at a deli wear gloves as they handle ready-to-eat foods. But latex gloves can cause allergic reactions and vinyl gloves contain a chemical that has been called a carcinogen.

that they prevent the transmission of illness. There are some who argue that the gloves themselves are dangerous to health.

“The typical hand contains millions of bacteria, including harmful ones like staph and strep,” said Elaine Larson, associate dean in the [Columbia University](#) School of Nursing and an expert on hand hygiene. “Gloves can prevent most of those bacteria from being transmitted to food.”

But only if the gloves are clean. “The problem is that a worker may never change the gloves or clean them, thinking that the gloves themselves are sufficient protection,” Dr. Larson said. “The trick is to make sure that workers are properly trained.”

That is easier said than done. Thousands of United States restaurant workers were surveyed for a study published in the *International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health* in 2005. More than a third said they did not always change their gloves between touching raw meat or poultry and ready-to-eat food.

Moreover, most gloves are made of latex, a component of natural rubber. Particles of latex can cause allergic reactions not only among people wearing the gloves but also among customers eating food prepared by them. As a result, three states have banned latex gloves in restaurants. In New York a bill has been introduced in the Legislature requiring warning signs in restaurants that use latex gloves.

Many restaurants have switched to gloves made of vinyl, but vinyl contains Di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate, or DEHP, a chemical that some scientists believe can cause testicular damage in infants and young men. It is also classified as a carcinogen in California. In 2001 Japan banned vinyl gloves from food establishments after large quantities of DEHP were found in food prepared by workers wearing them.

But in the United States, because of latex allergy concerns, vinyl gloves are becoming ever more popular.

Andy Igrejas, the environmental health campaign director at the National Environmental Trust, a nonprofit organization in Washington, characterized the switch as “out of the frying pan and into the fire.”

But Michael Herndon, a spokesman for the [Food and Drug Administration](#), said the government is “not now planning any regulatory action.” In 2002 his agency cautioned that “developing males” should avoid exposure to the DEHP in vinyl used in medical devices.

When it comes to food preparation, Mr. Herndon wrote in an e-mail message, DEHP dissolves in oil, “but is not easily soluble in water,” so it should be used in gloves “that are intended to contact foods of high water content only.” He did not elaborate on how restaurants were to follow that advice.

Allen Blakey, a spokesman for the Vinyl Institute, a trade group based in Arlington, Va., said: “We have seen no evidence that vinyl gloves are unsafe. The [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#) has reviewed the safety of vinyl toys, and the F.D.A. has reviewed the safety of vinyl medical devices, and both agencies have found little to no concern with the vast majority of vinyl products they’ve reviewed. I think that probably says a lot about the safety of vinyl gloves.”

The practice of using gloves in restaurants was intended to cut down on food-borne illnesses, which sicken tens of millions of Americans a year, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Some of those illnesses are transmitted by workers’ hands. Under New York State law, food workers must use gloves, utensils or paper when touching ready-to-eat foods. Most states have similar guidelines.

Rhode Island was the first state to ban latex gloves from restaurants, in 1999; Arizona followed in 2001, Oregon in 2003. The states acted as a result of increases in consumer complaints and in workers’

compensation claims stemming from latex-related allergies. About a dozen states are considering or have considered such legislation.

“I’d be thrilled to see fewer gloves, more washing,” said Sue Lockwood, the executive director of the American Latex Allergy Association in Slinger, Wis., who said latex allergies affect about one percent of Americans. Some sufferers try to avoid restaurants where latex is used, she said, but it is often difficult for them to get accurate information from restaurant employees. One way to be sure, she said, “is to ask to have a manager read the box” the gloves come in.

Adam T. Bradley, who represents parts of Westchester in the New York State Assembly, introduced a bill in January that would require restaurants to post warning signs if they use latex gloves. Mr. Bradley said a constituent told him about his grandson, who has a severe latex allergy. “The first step is to warn people who may be in danger,” Mr. Bradley said.

Such regulations are opposed by the Malaysian Rubber Glove Manufacturers’ Association. (Malaysian companies make most of the gloves used in this country.) Its representatives in Washington say the anti-latex claims are exaggerated. In 2003 it began what it called a public relations offensive that included pointing out that allergic reactions to latex are rare and claiming that vinyl gloves posed other problems.

Bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat food can be safe, said Dr. Donna M. Garren, the vice president for health and safety regulatory affairs for the National Restaurant Association, which represents restaurant owners and opposes mandatory glove rules. But it is safe only if employee hand-washing is carefully monitored. Some health experts agreed that regular washing would be more effective than glove use.

“The reason that workers wear gloves is that they don’t wash their hands as much as they should,” said Denise Korniewicz, a professor at the [University of Miami](#) School of Nursing and Health Studies who has studied the efficacy of rubber gloves for more than 20 years. “If you walk into any fast-food restaurant and observe people, they use

the cash register, they wipe their nose and then they make your sandwich.”

Some restaurant owners are not sure the gloves make anybody safer.

“When your hands are bare you can tell if you get something on them, and you immediately wash,” said Debra Silva, who owns Clem & Ursie’s, a seafood restaurant in Provincetown, Mass. “But if you’re wearing gloves, you might have no idea that you’ve touched something dirty.”

Ms. Silva said she spends thousands of dollars a year on gloves. “I go through a case or two a week,” she said. Each case contains 100 gloves.

Many sushi chefs prepare raw fish with their bare fingers despite the rules requiring them to use gloves, tongs or paper. On a recent night the chefs at a Greenwich Village sushi bar scoffed at the idea of using gloves. One, who did not want to give his name for fear of getting the restaurant in trouble, said gloves would make it difficult to tell, by feel, if the fish was fresh. In that way, he said, gloves could make customers less safe. “You can’t make real sushi with gloves on,” he said.

It was the same story at a sushi restaurant in Midtown. “We’ve been doing it this way for 250 years,” one chef said. “People who make the regulations just don’t understand.”