

SAFETY NOTICE

Steamer Safety

In recent months, the JIF has experienced several injuries involving commercial steamers in school kitchens. These incidents have resulted in steam and hot water burns to kitchen staff causing painful injuries, lost work time and worker's compensation dollars. Please take a moment to review this information, share with your Food Service Directors and kitchen staff and ensure proper procedures are being implemented to minimize injury risks.

Overview

Incidents that were investigated on-site and others that were reviewed from loss records had several common factors. The brand of steamers varied, however the operational methods are very similar. The injuries typically occurred when the food service employee cooked a product in the steamer. When the item was finished cooking, the employee opened the steamer door and significant steam and volume of hot water were released.



In most cases, it was hot water contact that caused the injuries. Excessive hot water built up on the interior of the steamers and when the door was opened, it spilled onto the adjacent table. The table drain was unable to handle the volume of water coming out of the steamer, causing it to overflow. The employees, in an attempt to minimize spillage, burned their hands, legs and feet in the process.

Findings and Prevention

These incidents are a result of a small gap in the overall maintenance of the equipment. In virtually every case, the food service employees are wiping down and cleaning the interior and exterior of the steamer daily. The plumbing and drain lines are usually maintained by the maintenance department. Most districts have the equipment tested and certified annually by an equipment service company to ensure everything is in proper working order. However, in most situations, no one is cleaning the steamer's interior drain line as recommended by the manufacturer.



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In several of the owner's manuals that were reviewed, the manufacturers provide detailed instructions requiring the internal drains to be cleaned via a USDA-approved cleaning solution. Most recommendations were weekly cleaning. The chemical solution helps to breakdown scaling and other particles that can cause the drain to clog, resulting in poor flow and water back up. This issue may be more pronounced in areas with hard water. For tough clogs, a manual auger or snake can be used to help clear obstructions.

When selecting an appropriate drain cleaner, make sure to read the warnings and Safety Data Sheet and follow the procedures closely. Some cleaners will adversely react to other cleaners that may be used in the kitchen. Ensure that personnel are provided with and wear the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE). This will likely mean a minimum of safety goggles and chemical-resistant gloves. The equipment manufacturer or supplier should be able to suggest the best cleaning solution for your particular equipment.



Make sure the drain screen is placed back in its proper position to ensure large food particles cannot pass through and clog the drain line. Restrictions and scale buildup in the drain line can cause compartment back pressure, premature wear of the door seals, excessive corrosion and failure of the equipment.

Recommendations

In an effort to minimize injuries to staff and damage to your kitchen equipment, the following steps are recommended:

- Carefully review the manufacturer's maintenance manual for your steamers;
- Train designated personnel in proper care and cleaning of the equipment, including the drain lines;
- Contact the manufacturer or supplier for recommendations on proper drain cleaner/de-scaler solution to use for your particular equipment;
- Develop a written cleaning/maintenance procedure to ensure all necessary tasks are being completed as recommended by the manufacturer;
- If you utilize a vendor for annual maintenance of your kitchen equipment, ensure that drain inspections of the steamers are included in the contract in order to catch any issues early;
- If you have a contract food service company for cafeteria services, but your district owns the equipment, make sure proper maintenance of the equipment is included in the contract with the vendor. This will minimize the risks of a third party liability claim if a vendor employee is injured by your equipment.



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