What do the health care regulations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act state?

“No food, drink, tobacco or cosmetics shall be consumed, applied or kept in areas where infectious materials, hazardous chemicals or hazardous drugs are used, handled or stored” (Ontario Regulation 67/93, S. 32).

Does North York General Hospital have a food and drink policy?

Yes. The Hygiene Practices and Facilities policy, IV-d-22, was updated in January 2014. The policy identifies that clinical spaces where patient care is provided is not an appropriate place for consuming foods or drinks. Examples of clinical spaces include: nursing stations, patient care areas, operating and procedure rooms, labs, pharmacies, re-processing areas, areas with chemicals such as maintenance or cleaning closets/carts or any other areas with infectious or hazardous materials.

Why is eating or drinking in these areas a safety hazard?

Clinical spaces carry a high bio-burden of patient microorganisms. Food and drink can easily become contaminated in these areas. The contamination places the health care worker at risk. Outbreaks of gastrointestinal illness amongst staff, such as Norovirus (formerly called Norwalk virus), have been attributed to eating and drinking off of contaminated surfaces such as nursing stations.

What about drinking water?

Water can become contaminated just as easily as coffee or food. A dispenser with cone-shaped cups is allowed in clinical areas as long as the immediate area around the dispenser is free from infectious materials (including patient supplies and charts) as well as hazardous drugs. Since cone-shaped cups cannot be set on a surface, the cup will not become contaminated and can be used once and then disposed.

Staff may have their own water bottles as long as they are kept in a non-contaminated area that is free from patients and potentially-infectious materials such as patient care supplies, equipment or charts and hazardous drugs or chemicals.
Where can we eat or drink?

Food and drinks can be consumed in designated staff lounges, cafeterias, offices, locker rooms, conference rooms or any common areas where there are no infectious materials, hazardous chemicals or drugs. In order to assist leaders and staff to determine whether an area is appropriate for drinking or eating, we have developed a checklist which will assist with the assessment.

What about patients and visitors?

The legislation does not cover patients and visitors and therefore, they are exempt from complying with this legislation. However, patients and visitors are also exposed to the same hazardous materials.

What are the penalties for non-compliance?

The Ministry of Labour enforces all health and safety legislation requirements and may issue orders and/or fines for non-compliance of any occupational health and safety legislation. Ministry fines may be issued to individuals, supervisors and the Hospital. The fines range as follows:

- Individual employees  - minimum of $1000
- Supervisors- up to $25,000 per offence or jail time, or both
- Hospital – up to $500,000 per offence

Where can I get more information?

Email Occupational Health at occhealth@nygh.on.ca or Infection Prevention & Control at ipac@nygh.on.ca.

This initiative protects NYGH staff, physicians, volunteers, patients and families and is supported by the Joint Health and Safety Committee, Infection Prevention and Control and Occupational Health, Safety and Wellness.