Elk Grove Village, IL (WorkersCompensation.com) - Workers involved in nearly every step of the modern food industry are at increased risk of occupational illness/injury and death, compared to other industries, reports a study in the July Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, official publication of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM).

Using a “farm-to-table” model, the study may help in targeting specific workplace hazards across the food industry, according to Kira L. Newman, BA, of Emory University, Atlanta, and colleagues. They analyzed US Bureau of Labor Statistics on occupational morbidity and mortality in food-related industries from 2008 to 2010.

The farm-to-table model framework considered five major food industry “pathways and processes”: food production, processing, distribution, storage, and retail. Food system jobs accounted for an estimated 15 percent of all private industry jobs in the United States (excluding jobs involving transportation between steps).

Overall, food industry workers had a higher rate of occupational illness and injury: 60 percent higher than workers in non-food industries. Severe injuries requiring time off work were more than twice as frequent in the food industry.

Although occupational deaths were relatively rare, the risk was higher in the food industry: 9.5 times higher than in other industries. For both illness/injuries and death, the increases were significant for nearly every area of the food industry. The sole exception was food service, which accounted for an estimated 59 percent of food industry jobs.

The study also lends insights into the causes of injuries in specific types of food industry jobs. For example, injuries due to slips, trips and falls were highest in the food processing, storage, and retail steps — possibly related to the high use of refrigeration.

The farm-to-table model has been widely used in studying food-related microbial risks and disease outbreaks. This approach can also be useful in understanding occupational injury, illness and deaths as “hidden costs” of the modern food industry, Ms. Newman and colleagues believe. They write, "Applying the farm-to-table model within occupational health...can reshape the understanding of how market forces in the food industry may impact workers and consumers."


About the Author — Ms. Newman may be contacted for interviews at kira.newman@emory.edu.

About ACOEM — ACOEM (www.acoem.org), an international society of 4,500 occupational physicians and other health care professionals, provides leadership to promote optimal health and safety of workers, workplaces, and environments.
About the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine — The Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (www.joem.org) is the official journal of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. Edited to serve as a guide for physicians, nurses, and researchers, the clinically oriented research articles are an excellent source for new ideas, concepts, techniques, and procedures that can be readily applied in the industrial or commercial employment setting.