Cooks and food service workers (CFSWs) constitute an important occupational group within healthcare in terms of workforce size and the vital services they provide. Because of the nature of their work, they are at higher risk for occupational injuries. To study the nature and causes of CFSW injuries, the Workplace Health Indicator Tracking and Evaluation (WHITE™) database was analyzed for two health regions within BC from October 1, 2004 to September 30, 2005.

A total of 173 injuries were identified among CFSWs with a rate of 38.1 injuries per 100 person-years. Our findings indicate that musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) are the most prevalent injury amongst CFSWs and accounted for 48% of all injuries. Other frequent incidents were percutaneous injuries (16%), contusions (13%), burns (12%), and irritations or allergies (8%).

Studying CFSW injuries by healthcare setting (acute care and long-term care) shows that workers within an acute care facility are at a higher risk for injury, particularly contusions, burns, and irritations or allergies. Faster work pace, greater workloads, insufficient staffing levels, and tight schedules as well as ergonomic settings might be some of the factors contributing to the higher injury rates within acute care facilities.

Heavy workload, repetitive motions, awkward postures, incorrect lifting, and forceful motions were described as the leading causes of MSIs by injured workers. Can openers, knives, stove doors, slippery floors, oil splashes, and cleaning products were also identified as causes of CFSW injury.

Prevention policies should be developed to reduce workplace hazards and to promote safer work practices. One approach to reducing the risk of injury among CFSWs could be training and education on hazard identification and reduction. The ergonomic settings, work schedules, and practices in place for each facility should also be studied carefully to identify and potentially eliminate the factors that increase the risk of injury to CFSWs.

- The findings suggest that, during the study period, female workers were at a higher risk of sustaining all types of work-related injury, except burns. Women were especially at a higher risk of developing an MSI - the MSI rate among women was more than twice that of their male counterparts.
- The rates of burns and percutaneous injuries were considerably higher among cooks compared to food service workers (FSWs), whereas the rates of irritations/allergies and contusions were substantially higher among FSWs.
- 29% of CFSW injuries resulted in both time-loss and medical care. 51% resulted in medical care and 20% in time-loss only.
- 37.3% of MSIs, 28.6% of percutaneous injuries, and 23.8% of burns resulted in time-loss and medical care. MSI injuries were also the most likely to result in time-loss only cases.
- Irritations or allergies were the most likely incidents to result in requiring medical care, accounting for 92.9% of cases.

The full text of this report has been published in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine. A link to the abstract is available on the OHSAH website.