

COUGHS, colds and stomach viruses are being spread through restaurants, cafes and takeaway shops this winter by employees who are being pressured into working while they are sick.

The NSW Food authority has investigated several reports of businesses suspected of allowing staff with symptoms of gastroenteritis, such as vomiting and diarrhoea, to handle food or serve customers. Gastric viruses are generally transmitted through touch, while respiratory bugs are also carried in droplets in the air.

The concerns have prompted the state government to set up a hotline where members of the public or employees can anonymously voice concerns about businesses that may be harbouring illnesses.

The Primary Industries Minister, Steve Whan, said employers who did not send sick workers home were in breach of the Food Standards Code.

"'If you're crook, don't cook' is a good basic rule to apply in the workplace," he said. "The NSW Food Authority is aware of cases where staff have been asked to work when they were sick, or have not told their supervisor they were sick."

Mr Whan said one sick worker had the potential to infect hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

Robert Booy, a virologist at the University of Sydney and the Children's Hospital at Westmead, said that people with serious gastro would be physically incapable of working through the symptoms, so the concern is for those with a "lower viral load".

"For the infection to transmit, it can either pass in droplets through the air - within a metre of someone else - or by handshaking."

He said it was far less likely for viruses to transmit through utensils or food, although the symptoms of food poisoning and gastro can easily be confused. Viruses have a short incubation period, usually one to two days, and the symptoms can last anywhere from a few hours to a couple of days.

"Once you're without symptoms the amount of virus in the body is relatively low and you're unlikely to infect someone."

Mr Whan advised workers who have had viruses to refrain from preparing food for 48 hours after their symptoms end.

The chief executive of Restaurant and Catering Australia, John Hart, said members took a serious approach to food safety but he agreed small businesses faced added pressure when staff become sick.

"Absenteeism is a big problem because we are a labour-intensive [industry] and a greater proportion of what we do is wage cost. If people are taking all of their sick days in a year it can take up a huge cost."

Mr Hart said some restaurants required their employees to have flu vaccinations and regular health checks.

Restaurants that fail to comply with the Food Standards Code could find themselves on the Food Authority's name-and-shame list. In the past week, 25 new penalty notices were issued to nine businesses.

The virus hotline can be contac-

Up in arms over shonky service

Bad haircuts, dodgy restaurant meals, pesky telemarketers – Queenslanders should know their rights. The consumer people at **Choice** offer some advice

Meal let-down

Taste is subjective, so asserting your rights about unsatisfying food in restaurants can be tricky. According to state fair trading laws, you have the right to a refund or remedy if the products or services do not meet reasonable expectations. But if you think the food is too salty or sour, you have the right not to eat it and request a replacement. Ask to speak

with the manager immediately and explain why you think the food did not meet its reasonable standard. You won't have a case if you polish off a meal that you claim is not up to scratch and refuse to pay. If hygiene is the issue, such as being served uncooked chicken or mouldy bread, you can make a case for not paying for the dish and alert your local council or the food authorities.