

Health Inspection Basics for Food Service Establishments

Approximately 3,000 state and local agencies are responsible for inspecting more than one million food establishments in the United States, according to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Health inspectors investigate a company's food handling, preparation and storage procedures to ensure that food is fresh and the environment in which it is prepared is sanitary.

State health codes and inspections protect patrons from foodborne illness and restaurant owners from costly liability. These inspections are important; the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that approximately 48 million Americans get sick, 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die of foodborne illness each year.

What Happens During an Inspection?

On average, state health departments conduct health inspections two to four times per year. Inspectors usually show up at your establishment without giving advanced notice. An inspection is not simply a "walk through," but a thorough examination of how food is stored, handled and prepared in your restaurant.

There are three types of inspections:

1. Routine inspections are usually unexpected. The inspector examines all aspects of your restaurant to ensure compliance with state health codes.
2. A complaint inspection happens after customers observe unsafe food practices or complain they got sick as a result of dining at an establishment.

3. A follow-up inspection occurs after a restaurant was issued a violation and was given a certain amount of time to correct the violation.

Health inspectors look for both noncritical and critical violations. Critical violations, such as proper food temperatures, adequate employee hand washing stations, commercial dishwasher sanitation, the presence of vermin and employee hygiene, are a priority because they affect the likelihood of foodborne illness. The CDC reports that currently there are 31 pathogens, such as E. coli and Salmonella that cause foodborne illness. Salmonella is the most common and can contaminate a wide range of foods, not just raw meat.

On average, state health departments conduct health inspections two to four times per year. Is your business ready?

Inspectors also look for a variety of noncritical items. Noncritical items can include properly labeled food storage, clean floors and walls and calibrated meat thermometers.

An inspection is also a time to draw on the inspector's knowledge and understand ways to correct violations.

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Grading System

As an inspector walks through your establishment, he or she documents any critical and noncritical violations, and assigns a certain number of points to each violation. At the end of the inspection, the points are tallied and a grade is assigned to the restaurant.

The following are three types of grading systems that are used:

1. **ABC grading system.** With this system, a restaurant is assigned a letter grade (A, B, C, D or F). Grades range from an "A," which means no or few violations, to an "F," which means the restaurant has critical violations and is usually temporarily or permanently shut down.
2. **Colored tags.** Colored tags include green, yellow, red and white. A green tag indicates few or no noncritical violations; a yellow tag indicates some critical violations; a red tag indicates several critical violations and the restaurant will be closed until further notice; and a white tag indicates that the restaurant is on probation after being previously closed.
3. **Risk index.** This grading system rates restaurants from "excellent" (little risk) to "inadequate" (high risk).

Consult your state's health department for more information on which grading system they use. Some states require that restaurants post their inspection results on their front entrance or window so customers know the restaurant's grade.

How Does a Violation Affect Your Business?

Health inspections are important to the health and safety of your patrons and the reputation of your business. Health code violations, especially critical violations, could result in costly fines, lawsuits and the temporary or permanent closing of your restaurant.

Even if your establishment does not get shut down, critical violations can damage your reputation and cost you money and time to regain customer sales and your patrons' trust.

Preventative Measures

Mandated by law, health inspections cannot be avoided. Take a proactive approach and you'll always be prepared for an unexpected inspection. While consistent readiness may not always be feasible, it's an important goal to work towards.

Having preventative measures in place will help you during a health inspector's visit. Here are some ways to stay on top of inspections:

- Research your local and state laws regarding health inspections. Laws vary from state to state. Know what laws are applicable to your establishment.
- Obtain a copy of the food service inspection checklist for your state and regularly conduct your own health inspections to ensure your business is ready for the day when the real inspector shows up.
- Consult the FDA website for a current copy of the Food Code, which offers suggestions and best practices for food safety and health inspections. Many state laws have been modeled after this document.
- Join your state's restaurant association to stay on top of state regulations regarding food safety, foodborne illness and health inspections.
- Require employees to take food safety courses and make safe food handling and preparation a priority in your company's culture. Display food safety posters and other relevant safety information in the kitchen, at hand washing stations and in the employee break room so information is readily available to all employees.
- Treat every day as if an inspector will show up.

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For more information about health inspections, managing your risks and obtaining insurance for your business, contact your independent agent.

