



NATIONAL
**FOOD
SAFETY**
MONTH

ECOLAB®

Cracking the Code:

Health Inspections & Violations

Anyone who works in the restaurant industry likely has some degree of experience with health inspections. While they can be a picnic for some and downright anxiety-inducing for others, routine health inspections are important for maintaining high food safety standards.

Part of the apprehension around health inspections stems from uncertainty. Not knowing when an inspector will show up, which practices they will be paying the closest attention to, or whether staff will follow all safety protocols can be unsettling for a restaurant operator. Especially when your reputation—or your business—is at stake.

The best way to combat this uncertainty is by knowing what to expect so you can stay prepared.

In this eBook, we cover everything you need to know about restaurant health inspections, including:



The FDA Food Code



The health inspection process, health code violations



Tips for staying inspection ready

Getting the facts straight on health inspections will not only help you ace your next review—it will allow you to deliver top-quality dining experiences. After all, providing safe, satisfying food service is what it's all about.



The FDA Food Code



What is the FDA Food Code and why was it created?

Although some health inspection items might seem random, all health inspection checklists are derived from expert food safety research compiled over the course of a century. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was initially formed in 1906 with the passing of the Pure Food and Drugs Act, which prevented the manufacturing, sale, or transportation of contaminated or misbranded foods, drugs, medicines, and liquors.¹

One of the most important functions of the FDA is establishing food safety best practices in retail settings to curb the transmission of pathogens. These best practices are updated every four years and published in a collection of guidelines known as the [FDA Food Code](#).

Since the FDA's creation, various key players in food safety have been introduced, all of which play a key role in regulating U.S. food manufacturing, packaging, distribution, and sales:

- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Services (FSIS)
- Centers for Disease Control (CDC)
- NOAA Seafood Inspection Program
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB)
- Federal Trade Commission (FTC)
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection



How is the FDA Food Code enforced?

Although every U.S. state apart from [California](#) has adopted some version of the FDA Food Code, the Food Code is not federally enforced. Rather, it serves as a guidance document for states and local jurisdictions to oversee the health and safety of food establishments in their region. Restaurants must adhere to their state or territory's own food safety codes and regulations; you can find yours [here](#).

¹ FDA. (2023, January 30). Milestones in U.S. Food and Drug Law..

What to Expect in a Health Inspection



Based on your region's food safety regulations, your local health department will conduct routine health inspections using a carefully crafted checklist. These checklists will vary based on your local jurisdiction, however, most inspection processes follow a similar structure.

The Inspection Process

Authorized food safety inspectors may enter food establishments unannounced at any reasonable time, on any given day of operation to conduct routine health inspections. Routine inspections are generally carried out every 6 months, but a health official may be called to perform an inspection for reasons like low ratings, customer complaints, pre-operational checks, [HACCP](#) approval, or when certification proof is needed.

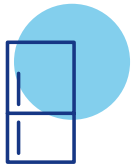
During a health inspection, the inspector will meet with management to discuss the purpose of their visit and begin filling out an assessment form

Most inspections will cover these critical food safety categories:

- Cleaning and sanitation
- Employee hygiene
- Food time and temperature controls
- Food storage
- Food preparation
- Utensil maintenance and storage
- Chemical storage
- Water, plumbing, and waste
- General facility set up
- Pest control
- Compliance and regulations

What to Expect in a Health Inspection Cont.

Some of the most common health code violations have to do with:



Food Storage



Time & Temperature



Personal Hygiene



Cleaning & Sanitization

Learn more about these critical, and preventable, violations in our [**Common Health Code Violations** infographic](#).



To get an accurate understanding of the state of a **food establishment**, **inspectors may ask questions, take measurements, record temperatures, read labels, or check equipment during an inspection.**

Once an inspection is complete, the health inspector will compile a detailed report, usually posted online within 24 hours—7 days from the inspection, along with a grade. These grades are calculated based on the amount and severity of health code violations a food establishment receives during an inspection.



Health Code Violations

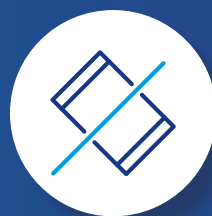


While they should be avoided to the best of your ability, health code violations happen. Some violations are relatively minor and easy to fix, although more critical violations will require immediate attention. **Let's go over the three most important violation categories:**



Priority Violation

Priority violations are issued when an inspector identifies unsafe food processes or problems with the facility that can directly lead to the spread of foodborne illnesses or injuries. Priority violations are typically issued for uncontrolled hazards such as improper cooking, cooling, reheating, storing, or hand washing practices. As the name suggests, these violations must be corrected immediately, usually within 5 days of an inspection report.



Priority Foundation Violation

These violations are issued when an inspector identifies practices that interfere with the successful execution of safe food handling. Priority foundation violations can be issued when there is non-compliance with labeling, record keeping, certification, or infrastructure. Similar to priority violations, priority foundation violations should be corrected within 5 days of being issued depending on the local jurisdiction.



Core Violation

Core violations are issued for operational infractions such as sanitation standard operating procedures, equipment design, general maintenance, or waste management. Generally, these violations must be corrected within 14 days of an inspection report.

There are other types of violations food establishments can receive such as foodborne illness risk factors (i.e., cross-contamination) and good retail practices (i.e., old equipment).



What To Do If You Receive a Health Code Violation

As mentioned earlier, violations happen so don't panic if you receive one. Unless the violation(s) warrant the immediate closure of your establishment, you will have the chance to correct these violations and move forward with a safer and stronger business.

If any priority violations or priority foundation violations are identified, you will receive a notice to correct these issues, typically with a 5-day deadline. Within this timeframe, it is mandatory for you to address and rectify all the critical violations mentioned in the report, and your team should be prepared for a subsequent inspection.

During the follow-up inspection, your team must document all the corrective measures implemented. This documentation will serve as evidence for the inspectors, who will verify its validity on-site.

A similar process applies to issues falling under the core violation category or other non-critical violations, however, you are usually given a longer deadline to complete these corrections.

In certain instances, food businesses may face fines for serious violations. Neglecting to implement the recommendations provided by the food inspector, particularly for severe violations, can potentially result in legal action, suspension of your operating license, or permanent closure. It's critical to fix health code violations as soon as possible to protect your patrons and your business.

Staying Inspection Ready

The best way to prepare for a health inspection is to treat every day like inspection day.



Is your leadership team recording important information like refrigerator temperatures?



Is there equipment that needs to be cleaned and/or sanitized?



Are stored foods labeled with their name and use-by date?



Is it time for your kitchen staff to get a hand-washing refresher?

The tasks you put off for a later date might be what earns you a violation at your next inspection, which is why it pays to be proactive. Not only will your team be operating at a higher level, but you can be confident that each dish you serve will be safe and satisfying.

To keep your operations inspection ready, download our comprehensive [Self-Inspection Checklist](#).



Step Up Your Safety with ServSafe

When it comes to restaurant food safety, your team is only as strong as its weakest link.

Whether your staff has had previous training or not, ServSafe training and certification programs are continuously updated with the most relevant food safety information.

Our programs, including ServSafe Manager and ServSafe Food Handler, are informed by the latest FDA research, and designed to protect customers, employees, and restaurant operations. **With courses and materials developed by industry experts, ServSafe is the most extensive food safety solution in the industry.**

Get in touch with our ServSafe team to start building a safer business.

