

How to Pass a Health Inspection

For many restaurant managers, when the health inspector shows up, it can be a stressful time. Restaurant operators don't always know exactly what they should be doing during a health inspection. There are many things the manager in charge should be doing when that dreaded time arrives. Here is a guide to help alleviate the stress, and, if used properly, it will greatly improve your overall inspection score. Remember, within the next year Salt Lake County will be posting all inspections on the Internet, so your performance when they walk through the door is very important.

Part I: Routine Inspections

1. Always escort the inspector through your store. Don't leave them alone unless you have no other choice. You want to make sure you see every violation when they see it, to make sure there are no mistakes and to make quick corrections. This will also help you learn what violations your inspector looks for. Every inspector has his or her own habits and tendencies.

2. Correct every violation that you can in front of the inspector. If you correct the violation, they will note it on the report, and that will be reflected online as well. Which do you think is better—getting 5 uncorrected violations, or getting 6 violations that have all been corrected? It is especially important to correct all **critical violations**. If you have too many criticals, they will come back and charge you an extra \$100. Always make sure the final report has documented all the corrections you have made. You will receive violations, but how you manage them is in your control.

3. Show the inspector what you are doing to manage food safety. Every inspector likes to see that the operator is controlling food safety on his own. This makes the job of inspecting easier. If the inspector knows you are taking a proactive approach to food safety, they will worry less about your store and spend less time there. Therefore, you should show them your temperature logs. If there is a problem with a cooling unit, tell them. Also, be sure to tell them what you are doing about it. Who did you call? When will it be fixed? Inspectors know your equipment might not always be working right, but if you tell them before they tell you, it will make a big difference. If the inspector is not confident in your ability to correct or manage the problems they see, they will come back and charge you for it.

4. Keep your files in order. Keep all food handler cards **current** and in one file. If you must keep them in individual employee files, that's fine. Create another file with copies of all food handler cards. Make sure your certified manager is current and registered with the local health department. If you have to search for these and you keep the inspector waiting, it will lead to more violations. The longer the inspector stays in your store, the more violations you will get. Make sure all managers know where these files are and that they are accessible at all times. If the inspector hears from you—"I don't know where they are" or "I don't have access to them. The office manager controls all that"—you are in trouble.

Part II: Foodborne Illness Investigations/Complaints

Inspectors don't always show up just to do inspections. There may be complaints or foodborne illness accusations. In Salt Lake County, if two or more people from separate households call the health department claiming you made them sick within a ninety-day period, they will do an investigation. In Davis County, they investigate **all** foodborne claims, even if it's just one person.

1. Stay calm. The health department isn't there to tell you it's your fault; they are there to investigate. They will ask you questions such as:

During the time in question:

Did you have any sick employees?

Were there any unusual circumstances (e.g., no water/power)?

What is your policy regarding glove use and hand washing?

Who are your food distributors?

Do you monitor your own temperatures?

Make sure you know the answers to these questions.

2. Again, keep your files in order! If the people got sick last Friday, you should be able to pull out temperature logs from that day immediately. All too often, I'll go out on an investigation and will find temp logs that are not in order. And it just so happens that the restaurant staff didn't take temperatures the day the incident occurred, or they took temperatures and they were all wrong, without any documentation of correction. What are the odds? The odds are pretty good, unfortunately.

3. If you have a program in place, use it! You want as much evidence as you can get to show the inspector that on that day there were no problems, all temps were good, all food was cooled properly, and you have the temp logs to prove it. If you don't have these available, then you won't have a leg to stand on, and you will be at the mercy of the health department and the accusers.

4. Complaints. Occasionally, an inspector will show up with a complaint. People call the health department for many different reasons. It could be a disgruntled employee or an unsatisfied customer. The inspector just wants to see if the complaint is valid. Here are some examples:

There was no hot water in the restrooms.

There was a hair/object in my food.

The employees didn't wear gloves when making my sandwich.

Reassure the inspector that you try hard every day to make sure those things don't happen.

5. No problem! As long as you are following the program set up for you, **every shift**, there is nothing to worry about.