

BVPPH Newsletter to our Food Establishments

BVPPH – Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health

Representing the Towns of Blackstone, Douglas, Hopedale, Mendon, Millville, Northbridge, Upton and Uxbridge

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Dear Newsletter Recipient,

Welcome to the 1st 2024 Quarterly Newsletter from the Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health! This quarter, we'll be discussing cleaning your restaurant. Specifically, we'll be focusing on which areas should be cleaned most often, when they should be cleaned, and the consequences of not following through a thorough cleanings of your facility. While cleaning can be time-consuming, especially for smaller establishments with limited staff, it is imperative for the long-term health of both your customers, your staff, and your business.

Overview

It should go without saying that keeping your food establishment clean is one of the most important responsibilities of a food manager. If a restaurant is dirty, you increase the likelihood of cross-contamination and making customers and staff ill. Dirty surfaces can attract pests and rodents. Unclean equipment can impart a bad smell onto the entire establishment. And worst of all, equipment that is not cleaned as frequently as it needs to be will break down quicker. All of these factors will cost you, both in money and in bad publicity. Therefore, setting up a cleaning schedule for your establishment is a cost-effective method of ensuring your food is safe and your equipment lasts as long as possible.

Cleaning Frequency

The first thing a food manager ought to consider when writing up a cleaning schedule is how often specific surfaces or equipment need to be cleaned. Some equipment, particularly the ones that see heavy use and come into direct contact with food items, require constant cleaning and maintenance. Other surfaces, such as walls, floors, and ceilings, don't require nearly as much attention. However, just because they need to be cleaned less frequently doesn't mean they should ever be neglected!

When deciding how often a surface or piece of equipment must be cleaned, it's helpful to consult 105 CMR 590, otherwise known as the "Food Code." The Code draws from a combination of state-specific guidelines and the federal code, and FC 4-5 ("Maintenance and Operation") and FC 4-6 ("Cleaning of Equipment and Utensils") go into detail about how often specific surfaces should be cleaned based on their purpose.

The Constantly Cleaned:

Some items, namely what the code refers to as “food-contact surfaces,” require constant and thorough cleaning. FC 4-602.11 (“Equipment Food-Contact Surfaces and Utensils”) indicates that any utensil or surface that comes into direct contact with food items (especially raw or time-temperature control [TCS] foods) must be cleaned extremely frequently. The specific cleaning intervals vary depending on what sorts of food the utensils or surfaces in question come into contact with, but as a general rule, they should be cleaned whenever the possibility of contamination occurs. In addition, in most cases, these utensils should be thoroughly cleaned (washed, rinsed, sanitized, and allowed to air dry) between different types of food, to reduce the likelihood of cross-contamination or cross-contact.

For example, let’s say you use a knife to slice raw chicken during prep. Then, shortly after you finish, you need to start chopping lettuce. To prevent contaminating a ready-to-eat food after contact with raw product, that knife will need to be cleaned (or else a new knife will need to be used). Note that this applies even if the raw product is an uncut fruit or vegetable. Even though these are ready to eat, transitioning from them to a TCS food could still lead to contamination.

There are caveats to this, of course. For example, if you cut the lettuce in the example above first and *then* switch to raw chicken that will be cooked, you don’t have to worry about cross-contamination, and thus the code does not require you to clean the utensil. However, this does not prevent cross-contact (i.e. the transfer of a potential allergen to a non-allergen), so depending on the type of food you’ve transitioned from, you may wish to clean the utensil anyway.

The savvy reader may have already guessed how one could save on time (and cleaning products) in the above example. By having separate utensils and surfaces for different types of food, you make your job much easier. Color-coding your utensils (for e.g., red for raw meat, green for vegetables, etc.) will help make it easier to train staff on which utensils to use and where to use them. Alternatively, you could simply prepare and handle specific product at different times. For instance, have your staff prepare all of the ready-to-eat product *first*, and only once all of them are cut and prepared, they can move on to the meat. Separate locations for preparation would also meet these criteria.

However, even under the above ideal circumstances with continuous use on only one task, and especially if the equipment is coming into direct contact with TCS food, they should be cleaned or replaced once every 4 hours at a minimum. This applies to utensils (knives, tongs, stirring spoons, spatulas, etc.) as well as equipment surfaces (cutting boards, tabletops, etc.). Do note that the code does outline exceptions to this rule, and more information can be found in FC 4-602.11(B). For the sake of brevity, they will not be outlined fully here. However, in brief, some food-contact utensils may be cleaned less frequently (usually no less than once every 24 hours) under certain conditions where the risk of contamination is low due to other factors (such as temperature control).

Daily and Weekly Cleaning

Most items that aren’t being so actively used do not have to be cleaned on a frequent basis. However, any equipment or utensils that come into direct contact with food will still need to be cleaned daily, or once every 24 hours.

The code calls out several pieces of equipment in particular. FC 4-602.12 states that the food-contact portion of equipment used to cook or bake (microwaves, oven interiors, etc.) must be cleaned at least once every 24 hours. This sort of equipment can be easily integrated into an either closing or opening cleaning

schedule. As a general rule, any food equipment that hasn't been cleaned on a regular basis during service should receive a clean-down as per manufacturer's instructions at least daily. If it comes into direct contact with your food product, the risk to contamination remains high, and thus frequent cleaning should be a top priority.

Some equipment, due to its secondary role in the food establishment, doesn't need to be cleaned as often. However, "not cleaned as often" does not, nor should not, mean "never." Oftentimes, restaurants will prioritize the equipment that needs daily maintenance, and neglect (or more often, forget) about the surfaces that don't need to be cleaned as often. However, for a number of reasons, this isn't something that you can sustain.

For starters, build-up of dust and grime on non-food-contact surfaces can eventually contribute to contamination of food-contact surfaces. Stains or food waste left abandoned beneath tables or near drains can act as a spawning ground for bacteria, and falling dust or grime from shelving units could contaminate food stored beneath it. Not only that, but dirty conditions can also attract pests. Moisture that isn't managed can attract insects, and food bits can attract rodents, flies, and other pests. Finally, allowing certain kinds of waste to build up, such as grease on vent units and dust on a fan, can interfere with their function and cause the equipment to break down. In the grease example, that break-down can be quite dramatic, as excess grease in a hot environment (like over a stove) could cause a grease fire!

So how often should these sorts of surfaces be cleaned? The code is relatively non-specific about that. FC 4-602.13 describes that nonfood-contact surfaces should be cleaned only as often as needed to "preclude accumulation of soil residues." In other words, they need to be visibly clean. But how long does it take for that to happen?

In short, the answer relies on the nature of your establishment. Let's use vent hoods above a stove as an example. Some establishments don't have equipment or menu items that contribute to producing a lot of grease-laden vapors. Therefore, they might not need to clean grease residue off of their vent hoods more often than once a month. But others, such as establishments with oil friers, foods heavy in grease such as meats, or using large-scale grease-producing equipment (like popcorn machines at a movie theater), might need to wash those same vent hoods once a week to keep them from becoming caked with grease. Therefore, you should set your cleaning schedule based on how quickly your particular establishment becomes dirty. In addition, not every surface needs to be cleaned religiously and often...unless it becomes visibly soiled every few days. As a result, when creating your cleaning schedule keep in mind which surfaces you should prioritize versus which ones might need infrequent cleaning.

When setting those priorities, even among the "rarely cleaned" category of items, keep in mind surfaces that might contribute to contamination of food or food-contact equipment. Drying racks and shelving units, as well as walls and ceilings near food preparation areas, should be cleaned as often as possible. Any surfaces where cleaning of other equipment takes place should also be a relative priority, like the walls above a 3-bay sink, or the tops and undersides of a dishwasher. Always be sure to check manufacturer's instructions, as they might provide insight into how often the manufacturer expects a piece of equipment to be cleaned to remain in peak condition.

Writing the Schedule

Once you've observed how often your establishment produces dirt and grime, where that contamination is concentrated, and what sort of equipment you have, it's time to sit down and come up with a cleaning schedule. A cleaning schedule is exactly what it sounds like: a formal, written plan that describes how often each part of your establishment needs to be cleaned.

First things first, focus on the items that need to be cleaned more than once per shift, or frequently during service. These are your utensils and food-contact equipment, as discussed in the first section above. Instead of necessarily putting them into your formal cleaning schedule, you could instead train your staff about how and when each item needs to be cleaned during service. Take advantage of natural turning points during the day to make sure items that haven't been cleaned yet get cleaned (such as shift changes, opening, or closing periods). These tasks should be the responsibility of any and all staff that operate said equipment/utensil(s).

Second, identify the items that require daily cleaning. Pick an appropriate time during the day when your staff are available to clean. It's a good idea to integrate this period into a timeframe where staff are already preparing their workspace, such as either before opening, or before closing. Closing can often be a very advantageous time to clean, since it will give time for equipment to air-dry before it needs to be used, and many food items will be removed for long-term storage containers and make it easier to reach in and clean surfaces like cutting boards on a line, the inside of microwaves, etc. Create a check-list for closing (or opening) staff so that they know what needs to be cleaned before or after service. Ideally, assign that cleaning to the staff members for whom it makes the most sense. So, the person who cleans the cutting boards should be the person who oversees the line, since they're already going to be either setting up or breaking down that area anyway. It becomes a natural step of their preparation process.

Finally, create a log for items that need to be cleaned less frequently. Instruct staff to perform cleaning duties during slow periods, or perhaps on days with limited service. Make sure that specific staff are assigned to clean specific surfaces or equipment. Make sure they fill out the log when they complete their work, and that a food manager has an opportunity to review the work to make sure it was done to the proper standards set by your establishment (using the food code as a bare minimum). Make sure to work with your staff about developing these schedules. Make sure labor is distributed evenly and fairly, especially difficult tasks that could be seen as punitive or a "chore." And accept feedback about the schedule. If your staff are telling you that they feel like they're cleaning a nonfood-contact surface far too often, even though it remains spotless, and you're able to confirm that this is the case, consider reducing the frequency. That way your staff can focus their attention elsewhere. Conversely, if staff express annoyance at how infrequently something stays clean, then maybe it's time to step up the frequency. Work *with* your employees, not against them. Take feedback and allow them to contribute to the creation of these cleaning logs. This will show trust and make staff more involved and committed to seeing the food establishment operate well. Just remember that you should still review the schedules, and make sure to always use the Food Code as your starting point. You should never clean *less* often than the code requires!

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