

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 second Quarterly Newsletter from the Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health! This newsletter is provided through a collaborative effort with the Central Mass Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) the towns of Blackstone, Douglas, Hopedale, Mendon, Millville, Northbridge, Upton, and Uxbridge, through a grant to supplement existing public health services through June 2025.

Food Storage

As in the previous issue, we will be covering one of the more common violations our inspectors see when they are in the field. Food Storage is specified in FC 3-302.11, but that section only explains that raw animal food should be separated from Ready-to-Eat (RTE) prepared foods. While the code provides some clarification on which foods should be separated from what, and emphasizes avoiding cross-contamination, the specific best-practices are not directly outlined. To make things easier, this section will provide some basic guidelines on how to best store your food to avoid cross-contamination, food waste, and spoilage.

Where to Store Different Food Types: When storing food items inside a refrigeration unit, always make sure to place RTE foods on the topmost shelves. These are foods that may be served to customers as they are, without any additional cooking or preparation. Beneath RTE food you should store plant-based food, including but not limited to fruits, vegetables, and other raw plant products that are intended to be cooked at a minimum temperature of 135 F. Beneath the plant food, you should store raw and intact seafood, beef, and pork products. While you can store these products on the same shelf and level, it is important to remember not to store them in the same container! Seafood (and shellfish in specific) is a very common allergen, and you want to be careful to make sure there's no contamination between seafood and other meats, or from two different raw meat products in the same container. Food items at this level can also include anything that requires a minimum cooking temperature of 145 F. Beneath intact raw meat, you should store tenderized or mechanically separated meats, such as ground beef. Food items stored at this level should have a minimum cooking temperature of 155 F. Finally, at the bottom-most level, you should store various poultry products, such as chicken, turkey, and duck. These foods have a minimum cooking temperature of 165 F.

How to Store Food Properly: According to FC 3-305.11, with the exception of drinks stored in pressurized containers, all food should be stored at least 6 inches (or 15 cm) off the ground, preferably on a pallet. No food product should be stored directly on the ground, except for the exception noted above. Food should be properly secured so that it is free from splash, dust, and other contaminants. Therefore, you should always cover your food properly to avoid dust,

drippage, and other sources of contamination. All food items that are stored outside of their original packaging should be labelled with their common name, unless it is otherwise obvious what the food item is (such as dry pasta). Most importantly, if you intend to store the food outside of its packaging for 24 hours or longer, the food must be labelled with the time during which it was first placed into refrigeration, as well as the time after which the food is dated to be discarded. Make sure that these labels are all accurate and up to date. If you have re-usable equipment (such as metal or hard plastic pans) for food storage, always remember to change the time labels when they are used for new food, and also change the common name label if applicable. Note: the code only requires date-marking for RTE foods that require time/temperature control. However, it is recommended that you date when you first put any food in refrigeration, so you know which to use first using the First In, First Out (FIFO) rule.

Where NOT to Store Food: FC 3-305.12 lists some locations where you should never store food products, because of the high chance of contamination. You should never store food in the following locations: locker rooms, toilet rooms, dressing rooms, garbage rooms, mechanical rooms, under sewer lines not shielded from drip, under leaking water lines or sprinklers (especially ones prone to condensation), under open stairwells, or any other sources of contamination.

The Why of Food Storage: The above requirements exist to protect your product from contamination. Keeping food away from prohibited areas will make sure to keep it free from dirt, dust, and non-potable water. Keeping food properly covered will prevent spills and dust build-up. Making sure food is properly labeled will prevent confusion and ensure that the food being served is fresh, and will also allow you to make better decisions in the event of a malfunctioning cooling unit about whether the food needs to be discarded (see below). Finally, storing food in the right order will help prevent biological contamination. If you stored chicken over plant food, for example, the plant food would not be cooked to the proper temperature to remove the pathogens commonly found in poultry. But since plant food is cooked at a lower temperature than chicken, if the raw plant food contaminates the chicken, the minimum cooking temperature should eradicate all pathogens commonly found on both types of food, and thus reduce risk.

Food Temperatures and Discarding Food

Pathogens, such as bacteria, tend to grow best when in the “temperature danger zone,” which is a range higher than 41 degrees Fahrenheit and below 135 degrees Fahrenheit. However, bacteria take time to grow and multiply. And although you should always strive to ensure you store food at a safe temperature (below 41 F if cold-holding, and above 135 if hot-holding), equipment malfunctions, human error, and other events can sometimes bring your food into the danger zone. So, how long can food survive in this zone before it becomes unsafe to consume? And what can you do to avoid unnecessary food waste and protect your customers from foodborne illness?

The Importance of Temperature Logs: During an inspection, you may have heard an inspector request to see your temperature logs if they notice that your food is in the temperature danger zone. A food temperature log is a commonly used tool to verify the conditions of food items at specific times, so that an inspector (and your own in-house food managers and food

preparation/service staff) can best determine how to handle potentially contaminated food. According to FC 3-501.19 (which provides guidelines for food storage outside of temperature control), food taken outside of a proper temperature can remain usable for up to 4 hours, *provided adequate evidence is available about how long that food was outside that range*. So, if you take thorough temperature logs and measure when a food may have entered the danger zone, it is possible that the food item can be brought to proper temperature and does not have to be discarded.

For example: a chef uses a probe thermometer to check whether a container of sliced tomatoes prepared the night before is at a safe temperature. At 8:30 AM, the chef notes that the tomatoes were at 38 F, which is a safe cold-storage temperature. If the chef were to check the same container of tomatoes at 10:30 AM and notice that the tomatoes were now reading at 43 F, they would know that the refrigeration unit may not be properly set or may be broken. Since they know that the food was at a safe temperature only 2 hours before, they can move the tomatoes to a properly functioning cold-holding unit to bring them back into a safe temperature range. However, if the chef checked the tomatoes only at 1:00 PM and noted a temperature of 43, then they know the last time the item was at a safe temperature was over 4 hours ago, and the tomatoes would need to be discarded.

Therefore, we recommend that you check the temperature of your cold-holding units and food items at least once every 4 hours (and preferably more often). Use a properly calibrated and sanitized probe thermometer to check at least two or more food items in each cooling unit, and immediately remove all food from cold holding that is not maintaining proper temperature until the equipment is repaired. Remember to clean and sanitize your probe thermometer between each food item! Note the time and location of the food items you checked on your temperature log.

If you have them available, you can use a label-maker or hand-made labels to mark food containers to the time the food items were prepared or last checked. However, an accurate, up-to-date temperature log is also a sufficient control. While this can be time consuming, remember that being diligent about food temperatures can mean the difference between safe food and hundreds of dollars or wasted product.

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