

The Health Inspector Cometh:

How to Prepare for Your Next Inspection

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It can happen at any moment. Satisfied customers fill your dining room, and more hungry patrons wait to be seated. The kitchen and wait staffs are working together seamlessly. And then, in walks the health inspector. To avoid ruining a stellar night at your restaurant, Orkin entomologist and food safety expert Ron Harrison, Ph. D., answers a few questions to help you stay prepared year-round.

1. What is the main thing that health inspectors look for at a restaurant?

Health inspectors look at the entirety of the facility, not just one component. That said, food safety (or the food code) is the inspector's main concern. The inspector scores a restaurant on areas such as food handling and preparation, personnel, equipment and utensils, cleaning and sanitizing, utilities and services, construction and maintenance, foodservice units and compliance procedures.

Even if your restaurant isn't shutdown because of health code violations, a low score can hurt your reputation and cost you customers.

2. How does pest control fit into the equation?

Pest control is only one aspect of the inspector's examination, but a pest problem can be the difference between passing and failing. Pests are especially unwanted in restaurants because they can carry diseases that cause foodborne illnesses.

Even if there are no signs of a pest infestation, inspectors look to see how you're keeping those pests out of your restaurant. If your restaurant uses pesticides, the inspector has to be sure that these chemicals do not put food at risk of contamination. You'll need detailed records of the type of pesticides used and application methods, proof of certification of the applicator and the frequency of service.

3. What are the most common types of pest problems that restaurants face?

In addition to playing host to the well-known issues of food handling and sanitation, kitchens are also magnets for pests. Your restaurant's kitchen is a haven for roaches because it offers food, moisture, shelter and unusually warm areas. To top it off, daily shipments offer roaches an easy way to "hitchhike" into your facility.

Exposed food sources in the kitchen, and especially in dumpsters, will also attract rodents. And flies go right for food and its byproducts, as well as the grease that is ever-present in kitchens.

4. How is pest control scored during a health inspection?

The points deducted for a pest

problem can vary from state to state, county to county, and city and city and also depend on the severity of the pest problem, as well as the type of pest present. For example, the presence of certain fly species could cause a much smaller deduction than the presence of rodents.

I like to compare the inspection to a 10-step coffee-making process. If you get 90 percent of the process right, that's ok — unless the step you missed was putting the coffee into the machine. In that case, 10 percent is huge. It's the same idea with a health inspection.

5. What other tips help restaurant owners prepare for health inspections?

Examine your restaurant like an inspector would, using forms available on many city government Web sites or using the report from your last inspection. Start by entering your restaurant from the outside just as the inspector would. From there, follow the flow of food from receiving to preparation to serving, identifying potential threats to food safety. Consider having an independent auditor or a new employee

perform this inspection to offer a fresh perspective on your food safety practices. Once you have completed this assessment, hold a staff meeting to go over the results and solve any issues that might cause problems during an inspection.

6. What is the biggest mistake restaurants make in preparing for a health inspection?

Because an inspection can take place at any time, your restaurant must always be prepared. One big mistake restaurants make is cutting corners to save money. For example, I had a friend in the restaurant business who lost his cleaning staff. Instead of hiring another group to conduct regular clean-ups, he decided that he could save money by doing most of the cleanup himself. The problem was that he forgot to do small things around the kitchen. Forgetting those daily sanitation practices over a period of time adds up, and before you know it, flies are breeding in kitchen drains and roaches are running rampant in your restaurant.

Lesson: don't skimp on the things that drive the health inspection. In the end, saving a few dollars by doing things yourself could lead to a costly pest infestation or health code violation.

To learn more about how to stay prepared for your next health inspection, download a free pre-inspection checklist at Orkin University online at www.orkincommercial.com/about/university.asp

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