

Food Handler Exam Cheat Sheet: Every Number You Need to Know

TEMPERATURE DANGER ZONE

- **41°F to 135°F** is the danger zone, where bacteria multiply fastest.
- TCS food may spend at most **4 hours total** in the zone across its life. After that, throw it out. Do not reheat it.
- TCS foods (time/temperature control for safety): meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, dairy, cooked rice, pasta and vegetables, cut melons, tomatoes and leafy greens, sprouts, tofu.

MINIMUM INTERNAL COOKING TEMPERATURES

FOOD	MINIMUM
Poultry, stuffed foods and stuffing, dishes combining raw and cooked TCS ingredients, reheated leftovers	165°F
Ground meats, injected or mechanically tenderized meats, ground seafood, eggs held for service	155°F
Whole cuts of beef, pork, lamb, and veal; seafood; eggs cooked for immediate service	145°F
Fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes that will be hot-held	135°F

Check with a probe thermometer in the thickest part of the food. Color and texture are not proof of doneness.

HOLDING, REHEATING, AND COOLING

RULE	NUMBER
Hot holding	135°F or above
Cold holding	41°F or below
Reheating for hot holding	165°F , within 2 hours, and only once
Cooling, stage one	135°F to 70°F within 2 hours
Cooling, stage two	70°F to 41°F within the next 4 hours (6 hours total)

Speed up cooling with shallow pans, ice baths, ice paddles, or a blast chiller. Never cool food on the counter.

SAFE THAWING: FOUR METHODS

- In the refrigerator.
- Under cold running water at **70°F or below**, in a sealed package.
- In the microwave, only if the food is cooked immediately afterward.
- As part of cooking, straight from frozen.

Never on the counter and never in warm water.

HANDWASHING AND HYGIENE

- Wash for at least **20 seconds** total, scrubbing for 10 to 15 seconds, then dry with a single-use towel or air dryer.
- Wash before starting work, after the restroom, raw food, touching your face or hair, garbage, eating or drinking, and whenever you switch tasks.
- Hand sanitizer never replaces handwashing.
- Gloves are a barrier, not a substitute: wash before putting them on and after taking them off. Change them when torn, when switching tasks, after handling raw meat, after touching your face, and at least every **4 hours** on one continuous task.
- No bare-hand contact with ready-to-eat food: use gloves, tongs, deli paper, or utensils.
- Jewelry: a plain band only on hands and arms. Cover cuts with a bandage plus a glove or finger cot.

SICK WORKERS: EXCLUDE OR RESTRICT

- **Exclude** (keep out of the facility): vomiting, diarrhea, jaundice, or a diagnosed foodborne illness such as norovirus, hepatitis A, *Shigella*, *Salmonella*, or *E. coli*.
- **Restrict** (in the building, but away from food, clean equipment, and utensils): a sore throat with fever, or an infected cut or burn on the hands or arms that cannot be properly covered.

STORAGE ORDER AND CROSS-CONTAMINATION

Refrigerator shelves, top to bottom, by cooking temperature:

1. Ready-to-eat food
2. Seafood (145°F)
3. Whole cuts of beef and pork (145°F)
4. Ground meats (155°F)
5. Raw poultry (165°F)

Keep food covered, labeled, and at least **6 inches** off the floor.

Color-coded cutting boards: **red** raw meat, **yellow** raw poultry, **blue** seafood, **green** produce, **white** dairy and bakery, **brown** cooked meats. Follow your workplace chart if it differs.

CLEANING AND SANITIZING

- Order: **clean, rinse, sanitize, air-dry**. Sanitizer on a dirty surface does not work.
- Chlorine (bleach) solution: about **50 to 100 ppm**.
- Quat (quaternary ammonium): commonly **150 to 400 ppm**, per the label.
- Test strips are chemical-specific: chlorine strips for chlorine, quat strips for quat. Test every fresh batch.
- Three-compartment sink: wash, rinse, sanitize, then air-dry.
- Sanitize food-contact surfaces at least every **4 hours** in continuous use, and whenever you switch between raw and ready-to-eat foods.

THE NINE MAJOR ALLERGENS

Milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, soybeans, and sesame. Allergens cannot be cooked out, and even trace cross-contact from a shared utensil, fryer, or surface can cause a reaction. When a customer reports an allergy, get the manager.

DATE MARKING AND FIFO

- Ready-to-eat TCS food prepared in-house and held longer than **24 hours** must be date-marked.
- Use or discard within **7 days** at 41°F or below, counting the prep day as day one.
- FIFO, first in, first out: new stock goes behind old stock, and you pull the earliest date first.

THERMOMETER CALIBRATION: THE ICE-POINT METHOD

- Fill a glass with ice, add water, stir, and wait. The probe should read **32°F (0°C)** without touching the glass.
- If it does not, turn the calibration nut (dial) or press reset (digital) until it does.
- Calibrate before first use, after a drop, after extreme temperature swings, and on a regular schedule.
- Infrared thermometers read surfaces only. Use a probe for internal temperatures.
- Wash, rinse, and sanitize the probe between uses.

PESTS AND HACCP

- Seal gaps, keep doors closed, store food off the floor in sealed containers, take out garbage promptly. Report droppings or pests to the manager; only a licensed pest control operator applies pesticides.
- HACCP: Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points. Find where hazards can occur, control them at critical steps, and monitor.