

Contra Costa Environmental Health

Congratulations on Being a New Owner of a Food Facility!

Retail Food Facilities Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need a permit?

Anyone who owns a retail food facility in Contra Costa County needs a permit to operate from Contra Costa Environmental Health (CCEH).

Permits do not transfer during a change of ownership so the new owner of an established business must get their own permit before opening.

How long does my permit last?

Permits must be renewed annually in February, no matter when the business opened. CCEH mails renewal invoices to permit holders every January. Late fees apply beginning in March.

If your renewal invoice did not arrive in January, call CCEH at 925-692-2500.

What happens during a health inspection?

CCEH inspectors conduct unannounced inspections of every retail food facility in the county. Routine inspections happen one to three times each year, depending on the kinds of food sold and how it is processed at the business.

Inspectors check all parts of the business, including kitchens, dining and storage areas, to ensure the facility is following the food safety practices that are required by law to prevent foodborne illness.

The inspector provides a written report at the end of the inspection, discusses the findings with the person in charge, and emails the final report to the permit holder or their designee.

If the inspector finds major violations, the business must immediately correct them while the inspector is present. If it cannot, the business must arrange for a billable follow-up inspection or close until the problem is resolved.

How does placarding work?

CCEH inspectors post color-coded placards in public view at most retail food facilities. The placards show at a glance how many major health violations were found during the last routine inspection – visit cchealth.org/placard for details.

Even major violations that are corrected during the inspection count towards placarding.

Facilities that receive a yellow (Conditional Pass) placard will receive an unannounced re-placarding inspection.

Permitted facilities that block, remove or tamper with their placards are subject to fines and potentially administrative action.

What happens if I get a complaint?

CCEH promptly inspects any food facility when there is a health-related complaint from the public. Complaints often involve claims of foodborne illness or unsanitary conditions.

The complaint inspection focuses on the reported problem. If CCEH verifies a complaint, the operator must immediately correct the violation and will be billed CCEH's standard hourly rate for the inspection.

During a complaint investigation, an inspector may also evaluate the facility for unrelated health code violations and require corrections, as if conducting a routine inspection.

How do I find out about a business's health violations or inspection record?

The majority of food facility posts a color-coded placard in a publicly visible spot that shows the major health violations the inspector noted during the last routine inspection.

The person in charge must also have a copy of the most recent inspection report available upon request for anyone to read on site.

CCEH also maintains a database of inspection results for every permit holder in Contra Costa County, available by visiting cchealth.org/eh. The information is also available via a free, downloadable Food Inspector app for both Android and iOS.

What is Food Safety Certification?

Most facilities that prepare, handle or serve unpackaged food, such as restaurants and bars, need at least one owner or employee that has passed an accredited food safety certification examination.

A new permit holder must take a course and pass the exam, or hire someone who has done so, within 60 days of opening their business. Certification must be renewed every five years. Inspectors will check for food safety certification as part of the routine inspection.

Who Needs Food Handler Cards?

Anyone involved in the preparation, storage or service of food must obtain a Food Handler Card from a state-approved source within 30 days of their date of hire. Cards must be renewed every three years. Inspectors will check Food Handler Cards for every employee that handles food during a routine inspection.

What is a Voluntary Closure?

If a circumstance causes an immediate health hazard at a food facility, it is the responsibility of the person in charge to close the facility and fix the problem before reopening.

Examples of immediate health hazards include no hot water, no potable water available, sewage backup, no electricity, insufficient refrigeration, or a vermin infestation.

If a business voluntarily closes, CCEH only gets involved if there is a need to replace or change out equipment – contact us before purchasing the new piece of equipment. Except when the voluntary closure is due to a fire, CCEH will have to inspect the facility before it can reopen for business.

If an inspector finds a business open during an unreported, immediate health hazard, the option to voluntarily close will no longer be available. The business will be ordered to close, receive a red placard, and may not reopen without a billable follow-up inspection.

If I want to add or replace equipment, or replace the kitchen floor, do I need to contact CCEH?

Yes. CCEH must approve all new equipment and remodeling material in a food facility. Call your inspector for more information – in some cases, exchanging like-for-like equipment may not require formal approval.

Can I set up a food booth at a festival if I have a permit to operate my restaurant?

No. The event organizer needs to get a temporary event permit from CCEH if there are any food booths, produce stands, mobile food vehicles, food demonstrators, or other temporary food facilities at the event. Visit cchealth.org/eh for more information.

Do I need a separate permit to operate a mobile food facility?

Yes. For more information about mobile food facility permits, visit cchealth.org/eh/retail-food/mobile-food.php.

May I sell food that I prepare in my home?

If you have a Cottage Food Operation (CFO) permit, California Department of Public Health has a list of approved foods that can be prepared for retail sale in a home kitchen. Visit cchealth.org/eh/retail-food for details.

What is an Employee Health Policy, and why should I have one for my facility?

It has been our experience in Contra Costa County that ill food workers are the leading cause of foodborne illness outbreaks. A foodborne illness outbreak associated with your facility can result in expenses for conducting a thorough cleaning of the facility and retraining of staff, lost revenue while the facility is closed, and typically media attention you don't want.

An effective employee health policy reduces the risk of food contamination by ill food workers. An Employee Health Policy ensures: 1. Employees are informed of the Employee Health Policy 2. Employees recognize symptoms of foodborne illness and know their responsibility to report to the Person In Charge any symptoms and diagnosed illnesses listed. 3. The Person In Charge (PIC) restricts or excludes ill or symptomatic employees according to the guidance provided by the Food and Drug Administration.

An example of an employee health policy is included in the new owner packet and online at cchealth.org/Food.