

Health Guidelines

Serving Food:

Check with your local County Health Department for your specific local codes concerning mobile food vendor carts pertaining to your area as they do vary somewhat from place to place. For instance, some Health Departments will not allow hot dog carts to serve dairy based condiments such as mayonnaise, grated cheese or even squeeze bottle cheese. In other areas of the country, these condiments are allowed.

The following guidelines, however, are generally universal in nature and are designed to keep you, your cart, and your food safe and appealing. Keep in mind that as a hot dog vendor you are considered to be a food handler by the Health Department officials and, therefore, you must operate under strict health guidelines.

Poor personnel hygiene, especially lack of or improper hand washing, is the number one cause of food borne disease outbreaks in the United States. It is also a very easily preventable cause of disease transmission. In this case the old axiom "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is very true. One such incident of disease transmission could seriously harm many people and ruin your business. Follow the guidelines!

Meet the Meat Guidelines:

Meat is considered by health officials to be a potentially hazardous food. This is because if it is stored at an improper temperature it can support the rapid growth of bacteria which would then harm any human consumers even after it has been cooked. Therefore, hot dog vendors must take great care in storing, handling and cooking their meat.

Many Health Departments will only allow hot dog vendors to serve pre-cooked meat products in the form of wieners or sausages that are to be re-heated to a specific temperature by steaming, barbequeing and/or grilling on the cart. The Health Department may not allow what are considered to be hazardous foods such as raw meats to be cooked on a mobile food cart. These hazardous foods include raw hamburger, ground beef, chicken, pork or steak.

Cooked meat must then be held above the temperatures specified by the Health Department. This required holding temperature also varies from place to place. This also requires the hotdog vendor cart to have a thermometer on hand to monitor the holding temperature.

Refrigerated meats must be stored below a specified cold storage temperature. This will require you to have another thermometer to monitor the temperature in your ice box or refrigerator. This cold storage temperature is usually about 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below.

Typically, a health department will require potentially hazardous foods such as sausages to be stored below 40°F (4°C), and after cooking, be kept above 140°F (60°C). The temperature zone between the cold storage temperature and the hot holding temperature is called the Danger Zone. Perishable foods such as meats should not be stored in this Temperature Danger Zone for more than 4 hours as this will result in rapid bacterial growth and food spoilage. Any meat that has been in the Temperature Danger Zone for over 4 hours must be discarded. Do not serve it!

Health Departments will require that you heat certain foods to certain temperatures before allowing you to serve them to people.

Pre-cooked hotdogs must be re-heated to 165°F before serving. To accurately determine this temperature insert the thermometer lengthwise into the center of the hotdog. Be sure not to pass through the meat and touch the cooking surface as this will give you a false high temperature reading.

Previously uncooked meats must be cooked to the following temperatures according to the New York State Department of Health:

- Chicken 165°F
- Hamburger 160°F
- Pork 150°F

Take great care to avoid cross contamination between meats and other food items. Always thoroughly wash and sanitize food preparation surfaces, equipment and utensils between uses. Be especially careful when handling raw, fresh or frozen meats. The area used for preparing meats must be washed and sanitized before being used to prepare any other food items!

Do not place cooked meat back on the plate or surface used to prepare or transport the raw, fresh or frozen meat.

Do not use the same utensils to handle cooked and raw, fresh or frozen meat.

Raw, fresh and frozen meats must be stored below and separate from any other food items to prevent them from contaminating the other items (such as by dripping on them).

Following these rules keeps the product fresh and prevents the growth of bacteria.

Considering Condiments:

Many Health Departments will not allow hot dog vendors to serve dairy based condiment products in the form of mayonnaise, grated cheese or even squeeze bottle cheese on the cart.

Some Health Departments will only allow hot dog carts to serve condiments that do not require refrigeration after opening.

Condiments must be kept in clean, washable containers and must be kept covered to prevent insects, dust, leaf litter, or rain to enter. Jars with screw lids may not be acceptable as they do not automatically close after each use. Often hot dog cart operators use condiment containers with hinged lids that automatically spring closed. Otherwise condiments may be served in small single service plastic packages. Squeeze bottles should be thoroughly emptied and cleaned at the end of each day or shift and fresh product added at the beginning of each new day or shift.

If refrigerated condiments are allowed, keep them below the specified temperature. This will require a thermometer to monitor the temperature.

Handling Food:

Do not work with food when you are sick, sneezing, have a runny nose, sore throat, diarrhea, vomiting, dark urine or yellowing of the skin (jaundice) or fever. Do not handle food if you have an infected cut or burn, pus or boil. Wear gloves over any cuts, abrasions, or burns.

Do not touch the food with your bare hands. All food should be handled using gloves, tongs, forks, spoons or other utensils. Keep a clean supply of spare utensils in a clean covered container. Remember, if it hits the ground, it is dirty – there is no 10 second rule here!

Clean your utensils at days end and store them in a clean washable covered container. Do not mix clean and used utensils together.

Provide proper food wrappers for your customers so they do not have direct hand to food contact.

The local Health Department may require you to have a sink or even as many as 3 sinks for washing utensils. (One for washing, one for rinsing and one for sanitizing in chlorine bleach)

The local Health Department may require you to have another sink devoted solely to hand washing.

Have hand soap, hand sanitizer and paper towels on hand at all times.

Hands must be washed after using the toilet, coughing, sneezing, blowing your nose, handling money, garbage or any other unsanitary or toxic item. Hands must be washed immediately when you enter your work area (the hot dog cart) even if you have just washed them in another area such as the bathroom.

Hands must be washed using hot water and soap and lather for 15-20 seconds and then dried using a single use towel (such as paper towels), a clean towel on a roller dispenser, or by an air dryer. Do not use a multi-use hand towels such as are used at home.

You must also wash your hands after eating, drinking, smoking, washing dirty dishes or other equipment, handling raw meat or other food, or even before putting on gloves to handle food.

The use of gloves should not be seen as a means to short cut proper hand sanitation. Gloves can also pick up and spread germs. You would not use gloves to handle raw meat and then also to serve cooked food as this would transmit bacteria from the raw food to the cooked food.

Keep your finger nails clean and trimmed short. Do not wear finger rings as these can trap and carry food particles and bacteria and transfer them to clean food. Rings can also cut through gloves.

Headgear such as a hat or hairnet must be worn to contain hair and prevent it from contaminating the food. No-one likes to find a hair in their hot dog. It could cost you customers or your hard earned reputation as a quality vendor.

Keep your clothing clean and neat.

Smoking is prohibited when handling food! Do not smoke, chew tobacco, eat or drink when serving food. You must leave the food preparation and serving area for any of these activities. Move a short distance away from your cart to eat, drink or smoke. You must wash your hands when you return.

You are, however, allowed to drink from a closed beverage container (such as closed with a lid) while in the food service area. It must have a handle to prevent your hand from touching the area that your mouth will touch or it must have a drinking straw. Wash it between uses or discard it after use.

Do not store food on the ground or the floor. This would subject it to contamination from dirt, insects, water, and spills.

Do not store cleaning chemicals alongside food or utensils. They must be completely separate. Keep all such chemicals clearly labeled.

Take great care to avoid cross contamination between foods and other items. Always thoroughly wash and sanitize food preparation surfaces, equipment and utensils between uses. Be especially careful when handling raw meats. The area used for preparing raw meats must be washed and sanitized before being used to prepare any other food items! Remember that raw meats are considered hazardous foods by many Health Departments and you may not be allowed to serve them from a hot dog cart.

Raw meats must be stored below and separate from any other food items to prevent them from contaminating the other items such as by dripping on them.

Many Health Departments require a roof, canopy or umbrella to be installed over a cart to protect the food service area from rain, falling leaves, and bird droppings.

Have a garbage container on hand at all times. Do not allow it to over-flow. Dispose of garbage as required. Clean the container at the end of each day to prevent odor.

Keep your food preparation and serving areas clean. Clean up spilled condiments and wrappers.

Hot Dog Cart Healthy Daily Operations:

Keep an operations binder on hand in your cart that includes: your business and location license, your health permit, a copy of the local health codes, a copy of your location rental agreement (if applicable) or vendor permit (if serving at a special event), and the operations manual. Keep these papers in plastic protective sheet covers so that they stay clean and readable. Always have on hand the operations and maintenance manuals for any of the other equipment you are using on the cart.

Always keep your product within the temperatures specified by the local Health Department. This will require thermometers on hand to monitor temperatures. Following these rules keeps the product fresh and prevents the growth of bacteria. Typically a health department

will require hot foods such as sausages to be kept above 140°F (60°C) and cold perishable items below 40°F (4°C). Precooked foods such as hotdogs must be first re-heated to 165 degrees F and then held above 140 degrees F until served.

Wash the cart every day before and after use. First wash the cart with hot soapy water to remove any dirt or spilled food. Then use a sanitizing solution to kill any bacteria. A sanitizing solution may be made by adding 1 teaspoon (5mL) of chlorine bleach to 1 quart (1L) of water. You'll need heavy cleaning gloves for this to save your hands and skin.

Use this same procedure for cleaning all surfaces used to store, prepare, cook or serve food, and all utensils and containers including sinks, faucets, and even the garbage cans (to prevent undesirable odor)

Fill the fresh water tanks with all new fresh potable water each day. Do not keep water from one day to the next.

Empty waste water tanks at the end of each day or shift. These also need to be washed to prevent odor.

Some local Health Departments will require the cart to be cleaned and loaded only at the commissary. The water tanks should only be dumped into an approved sewage drain, never onto the street or gutter.