

Cooking Verification

Perhaps you're the owner of a successful restaurant, or maybe you're even the Certified Food Manager for your business. You know how to create successful policies and train your employees. So why did you still get a cooking violation?

It's probably time to verify that your establishment's cooking policy is being followed.

First of all, what is verification, and how do you verify that your cooking policy is being followed?

Verification is the periodic validation of food safety procedures. Use your verification process for feedback on whether you need to retrain employees or modify your policy.

As you create a verification process to ensure your cooking policy is being followed, ask yourself these important questions:

How do you verify that policies and training are being followed?

Do you write anything down during your verification step?

Do you have logs?

Do your logs include monitoring of the cooking steps for all of your raw animal food? Does it include all of the processes during which food may be cooked?

Are you verbally testing your staff?

Do they know the minimum cooking temperatures for animal food? Can the staff explain what your policy is, and demonstrate how to follow your procedure?

Are you watching your employees to determine if they are following policies?

How frequently? In which areas of the kitchen? You may want to include spot checks of front and back of house areas, prep stations and on your cook line.

If a job is assigned to a mid-level employee, are you following through to ensure that they are doing their job, especially during busy times?

How often do you verify that your policies are followed?

Do you check logs daily? After each meal? Weekly? Frequent verification is helpful to ensure that prompt feedback can be given.

What do you do if a policy is not being followed properly or an item is found to be out of compliance?

Use areas of non-compliance to provide targeted training for your staff.

How do you document corrective actions?

Completing the AMC Cycle for Continual Improvement

When you find areas of non-compliance in your establishment, such as chicken coming out of your fryer at 135°F, try to determine the root cause. Was it because your employees need additional training on the cooking process? Is your equipment working properly? Or are their gaps in your policy that you can adjust to make your policy more complete?

Think about how you can prevent this issue from happening again.

Was it a problem with the...

Policy?	Or Training?
Food probe thermometers are not available	Employees don't know how to properly calibrate/verify thermometers
Food probe thermometers have never been calibrated	Employees don't know the proper cooking temperatures for food
Staff never check the cooking temperature of certain food	Staff do not complete logs regularly
Staff never check cooking temperatures during the mid-day rush	Employees take cooking temperatures in the thinnest part of the meat (which usually cooks the fastest)
Broken equipment continues to be used for cooking raw animal food	Improperly cooked animal food is served to consumers
Staff assume a prepared product arrives fully cooked, when it actually contains raw ingredients.	Employees do not inform managers of cooking temperature issues

If the issues are related to an incomplete policy, then you may wish to consider these steps.

In some cases, you may want to create a completely separate policy. For example, if the employee didn't detect an improperly cooked salmon steak because their thermometer was broken or not properly calibrated, and you never had a policy in place for proper use of thermometers, you might want to write a separate policy on thermometer calibration and use.

You may want to compile policies specific to the equipment that you use. Some employees may not be familiar with how to properly use all of the equipment in your establishment. For example, if you cook raw animal food in a microwave, you may want to write a policy that explains how to stir food mid-way, cover to retain moisture, heat to at least 165°F and allow the food to stand for two minutes after cooking for temperature equilibrium.

Similarly, if you notice that equipment is working but that a cooking issue arises from employees piling large amounts of chicken breast meat all the way to the edges of the grill and never bringing it to the center to fully cook, you may want to write a separate policy that addresses employee behaviors.

If the issues are related to training, then you may wish to think about these interventions.

Staff may need additional training in a particular area. Do staff know to check cooking temperatures in the thickest part of the food, and at the center of large, thick food that is baked? Do your staff know which food is categorized as TCS? Remember to provide feedback to staff quickly, so that bad habits are not formed.

Who is failing to follow policies? Maybe your training has focused on new staff, and your senior staff may need a refresher training.

Perhaps you need to have more frequent food safety check-ins or training. Brief, frequent trainings are more effective than a one-time lecture on food safety.

You may want to focus a training on corrective actions. Sometimes staff see a problem but do not take action because they think that it is someone else's responsibility. Or your staff may not feel that they have the authority to take action on a particular issue. For example, a new employee may feel the demand to serve customers quickly and inadvertently send food from the grill before it is done cooking. Be sure that you explain your corrective action process to staff, for example, by showing them how to correct mistakes by taking the time to bring the food to a safe cooking temperature and having the support of the manager on duty.

Do your employees know who to ask when they have a cooking question? Be sure that there is someone available for food safety questions on every shift. Ideally this person will be the Person-In-Charge during that shift.

The last part of a verification process for managers to review verification documents and logs to look for patterns and problem areas. These may be times of day when cooking temperatures are more difficult to achieve, such as cooking turkey burgers from raw at a high volume special event. Or, you may find cooking equipment, like older flattop grills, that cooks unevenly. Likewise, you may identify specific prepared food such as chorizo that staff assume to be fully cooked, but actually contains raw pork. Use insights from your review to suggest changes to your food safety team, and modify your cooking policy.

To summarize, here are the key steps to consider with any verification process:

- **Use your verification process for feedback about whether your policy is being followed**
- **Implementing logs works well to verify that your systems are working**
- **When you identify problems, quickly provide feedback to staff**
- **Regularly review logs and verification results to look for patterns and problem areas**





A Retail Food Service Manager's Guide

- **Look for the root cause of issues that you identify. Was it policy or training related?**
- **Modify policies or schedule additional training based on information you gather during your verification step.**

Remember, after making changes to your cooking policy, be sure to retrain your employees. You may wish to reread the Manager's Guide to Creating a Policy, and the Manager's Guide on Training your Employees.

