

Food Safety: Skills and knowledge for food businesses

Guidance for food businesses on the skills and knowledge requirement of
Food Safety Standard 3.2.2 *Food Safety Practices and General Requirements*

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For further information on the Food Safety Standards and other regulatory matters, please refer to the Food Standards Australia New Zealand website at www.foodstandards.gov.au or, in New Zealand, www.foodstandards.govt.nz.

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Introduction

This is a guide to help proprietors in small food businesses understand the legal requirement for skills and knowledge in food safety and food hygiene.

The Food Safety Standards require food businesses in Australia to make sure that food handlers and supervisors of food handling operations within their business have skills and knowledge of food safety and food hygiene for the work that they do. The only exemption is for food handlers involved in charitable or community fundraising events that sell food that is not potentially hazardous or that will be eaten immediately after being cooked thoroughly.

The Food Safety Standards are progressively being introduced into States and Territories. If you would like to know when the requirements for skills and knowledge applies, check with your local council or State or Territory health department.

The guide, unlike the Food Safety Standards, is not legally binding. If there is any doubt about the interpretation of the Standards, independent legal advice should be sought.

What is in this booklet

While there are ideas in this booklet about how food businesses might comply with the skills and knowledge requirement, it is important that food businesses know that they are able to choose the approach to suit their business, provided the approach achieves the required results.

This booklet has two sections:

- 1 Skills and knowledge—an introduction** gives some general information on the skills and knowledge requirement and what the requirement intends to achieve.
- 2 A guide to skills and knowledge needed by food handlers** aims to help food businesses understand the skills and knowledge that food handlers are likely to need to comply with the standards. This is a guide only.

Please take the time to read this booklet.

Where to go for more information

The requirement for skills and knowledge is in Food Safety Standard 3.2.2 *Food Safety Practices and General Requirements*.

Your local council, or State or Territory Health department can provide you with information about the Food Safety Standards. They are available to download on the website www.foodstandards.gov.au.

1 Skills and knowledge—an introduction

What is the skills and knowledge requirement?

Food Safety Standard 3.2.2 *Food Safety Practices and General Requirements* says that food businesses must make sure that food handlers and people who supervise food handlers have skills and knowledge in food safety and food hygiene for the work they do.

Food handlers are those of your staff who are involved in any activity in your business that involves food or surfaces likely to come in contact with foods. It covers your staff whose work involves manufacturing, processing, preparing (such as chopping, cooking, thawing), delivering, transporting or packing your food and your staff that clean your premises and equipment.

What do the terms 'skill' and 'knowledge' mean?

A skill is being able **to do** something. It means that food handlers and their supervisors are able **to do** the things in their work that keep food safe.

Knowledge is **knowing about** or understanding something. It means that food handlers and their supervisors know what must be done to keep food safe.

Food safety is ensuring that food is safe to eat. **Food hygiene** is keeping your food premises and equipment clean.

What skills and knowledge do food handlers and their supervisors need?

Food handlers need those skills and knowledge required to keep food safe for the jobs that they carry out in the business. They do not need skills and knowledge for all jobs in the business. For example, a cook will need skills and knowledge in food safety and food hygiene that are quite different from those needed by a waitress or a cleaner.

However, if staff do different work from time to time, for example when other food handlers are away, or if they supervise other food handlers, then they must have the skills and knowledge needed for this other work as well.

Why is a skills and knowledge requirement needed?

The skills and knowledge requirement is an important step forward because it will help to raise the level of skills and knowledge among food handlers. It will help to ensure that food prepared and sold in Australian food businesses is safe to eat.

Will the skills and knowledge requirement be good for business?

Making sure that food handlers have skills and knowledge is not only about meeting legal obligations; it is also good for business. Australian consumers are becoming more aware of how food should be handled to keep it safe. Consumers can recognise poor practices. They may not complain but they may not come back, either.

All good businesses make sure that workers know how to do the job that they are employed to do. For example, workers might have been instructed in how to open the shop, order new supplies, deal with customers or use the cash register. Many of these skills are taught within the business, either by the proprietor or by an experienced staff member.

Making sure that food handlers have the skills and knowledge in food hygiene and food safety should be seen as a normal part of making sure that employees have the right skills for the job.

Will formal training be required?

Food handlers do not have to attend food safety training courses to meet the skills and knowledge requirement. A food business can adopt the most appropriate approach, such as on-the-job training, prior experience or an in-house training course.

However, a food business may decide that formal training is the best approach where the skills and knowledge required are more complex. Examples are the manufacturing sector or in high-risk businesses such as hospitals or nursing homes. This decision will be up to individual businesses to make.

People learn in different ways and acquiring skills and knowledge (which is what learning is all about) can be acquired in different ways as well. People can learn by being told, for example, that potentially hazardous food must be cooled quickly to prevent growth of food poisoning bacteria during the cooling process. People can learn by being shown a demonstration of how to safely cool food by placing it in shallow trays, for example. People can also learn by performing a task under supervision together with an explanation of why the task needs to be done.

All of these methods are likely to be effective at different times and with different people. Most people will be able to acquire the skills and knowledge needed, but they may need to be monitored from time to time to make sure that they have not only learned what to do, but that they do it consistently.

Will the requirement be difficult for business to comply with?

Keeping food safe does not have to be difficult, complicated or expensive for business. What it does require, though, is for people who handle food as part of their work to know how to do it safely. To ensure this, food businesses need to understand the food safety risks in the business and how these can be minimised.

One of the best ways for businesses to meet the skills and knowledge requirement is by making sure food handlers in the business have the skills and knowledge to comply with the national Food Safety Standards. Section 2 *A guide to skills and knowledge needed by food handlers* provides more information on this.

How can a business meet its legal obligations?

It will be important for food businesses to think carefully about which people in the business handle food, the range of food handling tasks they do, whether they have any gaps in their skills or knowledge, and how these skills and knowledge can be provided.

A proprietor might want to consider the following points:

- Do all food handlers have the food safety and food hygiene skills and knowledge for the work they do?
- If not, what sort of training is required and where can it be accessed?
 - For example, is there someone in the business who could instruct other food handlers?
 - If not, is there someone within the business (for example the proprietor or manager) who could undertake formal training and then instruct others?
- Is it a cost-effective option for the business to engage someone to train all of the food handlers within the business? This training could be delivered on-site and tailored for the individual business.

Where is there information on food safety and hygiene courses?

There are many food safety and hygiene courses available at varying costs. Some are offered during the evening.

To see what training courses are available in your area, check the Yellow Pages under 'Training'. For further advice on courses that may be available, you could also:

- contact a teaching institution in your area such as a TAFE college or institute of technology;
- contact an industry association;
- contact your local council; or

- conduct a website search on the National Training Information Service website (www.ntis.gov.au) which contains a database on courses available in Australia.

How can skills and knowledge be monitored?

The legal obligation to make sure that food handlers have the necessary skills and knowledge in food safety and food hygiene rests with the food business. The easiest way for a business to meet this legal requirement is by making sure all food handlers know what to do, and how to do, all of the things needed to comply with the national Food Safety Standards that are applicable to them.

Whether food handlers have prior skills and knowledge or the business has provided these in-house, food businesses still need to make sure that food handlers are applying their skills and knowledge so that the food business is producing safe food.

To monitor skills and knowledge, food businesses might think about these points:

- Do all food handlers know how the business expects food to be handled so that the business complies with the new Food Safety Standards?
- Do food handlers understand their health and hygiene responsibilities?
- Is there someone in the business who is responsible for ensuring that the staff handle food safely?

As the proprietor, think about whether you have fulfilled your legal responsibility under the Food Safety Standards to explain the health and hygiene requirements in the standards to your food handlers.

You must also ensure that there is the necessary food handling equipment available so that food handlers handle food safely.

Section 2 provides some guidance on the skills and knowledge that may be needed by your food handlers to ensure that your business complies with the Food Safety Standards.

2 A guide to skills and knowledge needed by food handlers

This guide aims to help businesses understand some of the skills and knowledge needed by food handlers doing a variety of food handling tasks within a food business.

There are two broad categories of skills and knowledge required. These can be summarised under two categories.

General practices

- Personal hygiene practices and responsibilities about their health that all food handlers preparing food know and put into practice.
- Food handling practices to prepare and store food correctly.
- Hygiene practices to keep the food premises and equipment clean and well maintained.

Specific practices

- Skills and knowledge needed for more specific food handling operations, such as receiving food into the premises, cooking, reheating and cooling food, controlling the time food is at room temperature and disposing of food.

Should I start with some basic information for my food handlers?

As a food business it is good practice to ensure that before anyone is allowed to start work as a food handler in your business for the first time, they should receive oral or written instruction in the essentials of food hygiene. This is basic information included in the general practices category above.

The essentials of personal hygiene are:

- Keep yourself clean and wear clean clothing.
- Always wash your hands thoroughly under running warm water using soap, and dry thoroughly. Do this before handling food, after using the toilet, after handling raw foods or waste, before starting work, after every break and after blowing your nose.
- Tell your supervisor, before starting work for the day, of any skin, nose, throat, stomach or bowel trouble, or infected wound.
- Ensure cuts and sores are covered with a waterproof dressing.
- Avoid unnecessary handling of food.
- Do not smoke, eat or drink where there is unprotected food, and never cough or sneeze over food.

- If you see something wrong, tell your supervisor.

The essentials of food handling are:

- Do not prepare food too far in advance of service unless you can keep it refrigerated or very hot until it is used.
- Store and display potentially hazardous foods either refrigerated (5°C or below) or very hot (60°C or above) or have a safe alternative system in place such as in the '2-hour/4-hour guide'.
- Keep the preparation of raw and cooked foods strictly separated.
- Only use clean and sanitised chopping boards, other food contact surfaces, food handling utensils, and eating and drinking utensils.

General practices for cleaning and sanitising are:

- Clean and sanitise as you go. Keep all equipment and surfaces clean.
- Report any cleaning, sanitising, pest control or maintenance matters to your supervisor.

These points can be amended to suit each business. Some points may not be relevant for your business.

Finally, ensure that your staff have the ability to carry out these general instructions and practise their knowledge.

What is the next step?

Staff may need to know where they can find information about their food safety responsibilities and what these responsibilities are. Ensure that your staff:

- can locate and follow workplace information about their own food handling operations in regard to food safety;
- can identify and correct (or report) situations or procedures that do not meet your business's agreed workplace practices for food safety; and
- know their own responsibilities in regard to health and hygiene requirements.

Which specific skills and knowledge will my staff need?

Staff responsible for carrying out specific tasks, and their supervisors, must have skills and knowledge that will enable them to carry out their food handling tasks or other work in the food premises in a safe and hygienic manner.

Two examples demonstrate the food safety skills and knowledge that your staff may need if they are responsible for receiving food that is delivered to your business or for displaying food on a hot self-service buffet.

Example: Food receipt**General skills and knowledge**

The following general skills and knowledge would be necessary for a food handler responsible for assessing the safety of food as it is delivered to the business:

- knowledge that food may be unsafe when being delivered to the business and must be checked before it is accepted; and
- skill to assess the safety of food when it is being delivered to the business.

An example of specific skills and knowledge—checking temperatures

A food handler who is responsible for checking the temperature of potentially hazardous foods delivered to a business would need knowledge of:

- which foods are potentially hazardous and therefore need to be checked;
- the proportion of foods to be checked for each delivery; and
- what the correct temperatures are and what to do if the food is not at the correct temperature.

The food handler would need to have the skills:

- to take accurate temperatures of potentially hazardous foods using a temperature probe.

Example: Displaying hot food on a self-serve buffet**General skills and knowledge**

The following general skills and knowledge would be necessary for a food handler responsible for the self-service hot food display.

Knowledge that:

- bacteria may multiply in potentially hazardous foods if the foods are not held at 60°C or hotter;
- customers are a source of contamination of food; and
- all equipment must be clean and sanitised before being used.

Skills to assess the safety of the food in the display.

An example of specific skills and knowledge—supervising the display

A food handler who is responsible for supervising the display to ensure that customers do not contaminate food would need knowledge of:

- indications that food may have been contaminated or likely to be contaminated, for example seeing customers taste food in the display or drop serving utensils on the floor; and
- that any food that is likely to have been contaminated must be removed from the display immediately.

They would need to have the skills to:

- set up the display so that protective barriers are correctly in place and separate serving utensils are provided for each food.

Should I keep training records?

You are not required by law to keep training records. However, it is a good practice for a food business to keep a training plan to identify the training needed for each member of staff or for each category of work within the business. It is also good practice for a business to keep records of the training that has been completed by each staff member, and details of when the training was done.

Keeping written evidence of training may also be very useful to show 'due diligence' that you as a business proprietor are aware of your legal obligations about skills and knowledge for food handlers if this is called into question.

Finally

Your local council or public health unit is responsible for enforcing the Food Safety Standards. Discuss your compliance with the skills and knowledge requirement with your local council, public health unit or State or Territory Health department.