

Introduction

Foodborne illness in the United States is a major cause of personal distress, preventable death, and avoidable economic burden. Recent data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate 76 million illnesses, 323,914 hospitalizations, and 5,194 deaths from foodborne illness in the United States each year. The annual cost of foodborne illness in terms of pain and suffering, reduced productivity, and medical costs is estimated to be between \$10- \$83 billion annually.¹

The United States Public Health Service has determined through several studies that effective foodborne disease prevention requires the application of comprehensive food sanitation measures from production to consumption. The Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA)'s purpose in maintaining an updated model food code is to assist food control jurisdictions at all levels of government by providing them with a scientifically sound technical and legal basis for regulating the retail segment of the food industry.²

FDA's Model Food Code provides guidance on food safety, sanitation, and fair equitable advice that can be uniformly adopted for the retail and food service segment of the food industry. The document is the cumulative result of the efforts and recommendations of many contributing individuals, agencies, and organizations with years of experience using earlier model code editions. It embraces the concept that our quality of life, state of health, and the public welfare are directly affected by how we collectively provide and protect our food. The current edition of the Food Code provides other users of the Food Code, such as educators, trainers, and the food service, retail food, and vending industries, with up-to-date information of how to best mitigate risk factors that contribute to foodborne illness.³

The FDA Food Code establishes 5 key public health interventions to protect consumer health, specifically; demonstration of knowledge; employee health controls; controlling hands as a vehicle of contamination; time and temperature parameters for controlling pathogens; and consumer advisory.⁴ The Georgia Department of Public Health believes by adopting and implementing these sound public health interventions is a foundation to reducing foodborne illness within its jurisdiction.

¹ Taken from FDA's talking points for why a jurisdiction should adopt the latest FDA Model Food Code.

² Taken from FDA's talking points for why a jurisdiction should adopt the latest FDA Model Food Code.

³ Taken from FDA's talking points for why a jurisdiction should adopt the latest FDA Model Food Code.

⁴ Taken from FDA's talking points for why a jurisdiction should adopt the latest FDA Model Food Code.

There are several state and federal government agencies involved in overseeing different parts of the food chain. At the state level, two regulatory agencies strive to minimize foodborne illness in food sales and food service establishments. The Georgia Department of Agriculture regulates the food supply from the farm, through the food processing and storage sites to the grocery store. The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), through county boards of health, regulates food service establishments where foods are primarily prepared for immediate consumption.

Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH)'s inherited food service program has come a long way from when the state began regulating food service establishments in 1967. The Rules and Regulations for the inspection of food service establishments have undergone several revisions. In 1995, the rules were revised based on the 1993 FDA Model Food Code in preparation for the Centennial Olympic Games that were held in Georgia in 1996. State Auditors conducted a 2002 performance audit of the statewide program. The report outlined a number of performance improvement recommendations, one of which related directly to an existing two-year effort to thoroughly revise the state regulation.

In response to the 2002 state performance audit, a General Sanitation Committee began working on revising the Rules and Regulations for Food Service, Chapter 290-5-14 (Georgia Food Code). The Committee decided to model the rules after the FDA Model Food Code. This Model Code has been modified regularly to keep pace with the changes in the epidemiology of foodborne diseases. These modifications to the Model Food Code occurred 2001, 2003, and 2005 and continue approximately every 4 years. Current and future committees will continue to use the most current FDA Model Food Code as their model for revisions of Georgia's Food Code.

On January 18, 2007, the then Board of Human Resources adopted revised DHR Rules and Regulations for Food Service, Chapter 290-5-14. Since the DHR adoption of the revised Georgia Food Code, an Implementation Advisory Committee made up of representatives of the food industry, federal and state regulatory agencies, academia and the citizenry of Georgia were created to provide guidance in the implementation of the newly adopted 2007 Georgia Food Code along with the development of two manuals: the "Interpretation Manual for the Georgia Rules and Regulations for Food Service" and the "Food Service Establishment Manual for Design, Installation and Construction".

With the soon to be adoption of the 2009 FDA Model Food Code by the newly created Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), Georgia will continue to protect its citizens and guest through its Rules and Regulations that are based upon the most current nationally accepted, food safety related science.

The major revisions made to the Rules of the Georgia Food Code in 2007 were:

1. The definition for potentially hazardous food was change to be more specific on types of pathogenic microorganisms and foods that are not considered potentially hazardous.
2. A Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) plan is required for processes that vary from the rules. A proposed HACCP plan must be approved by both the state office and the local county health department before implementation will be allowed. HACCP is a driving force of the food industry. Any process that varies from the rules will have to be proven through sound documentation that it will maintain the food's wholesomeness and safety until served.
3. The successful completion of an exam accredited by the Conference for Food Protection or other accrediting agencies as conforming to national standards for organizations that certify individuals.
4. Demonstration of knowledge by the person-in-charge and employees is required.
5. More specific criteria for Employee Health and for Exclusions and Restrictions for Sick Employees are given.
6. Hand washing required after restroom use and upon entering food preparation and Single Hand Wash required upon entering kitchen
7. Fingernails must be no longer than tips of the fingers unless a glove is worn when preparing food.
8. An allowance for employees to drink from a closed beverage cup with straw is allowed while working.
9. The required cooling procedure is currently: 135°F to 70°F in 2 hours and 70°F to 41°F in 4 hours for a total cooling time of 6 hours verses from 140°F to 41°F as required under the previous Georgia Food Code.
10. Bare hand contact of the food service establishment employee with ready-to-eat foods will not be allowed.
11. Required treatment of raw or partially cooked fish to kill parasites except for some species is specified.
12. The minimum internal cook temperature for pork is specified as 145°F for 15 seconds.
13. Date marking provisions for prepared foods held longer than 24 hours are specified.
14. Time as a public health control is allowed in lieu of temperature when any leftover food after 4 hours will be discarded. Written procedures are required to be on file in the establishment as well as individual labeling of the product so that employees are aware of it.
15. An adequate thermometer for the food being tested is required.
16. An advisory notice is required if potentially hazardous foods are offered in raw or undercooked form. More specific requirements for placement are given in the proposed rules than in the 1996 rules.

17. Frequency of cleaning food contact surfaces is based on room temperature.
18. A Certified Pest Control Operator is required to apply restricted-use pesticides.
19. Frequency of inspection will be based on the risk type designated for the establishment and on grade history.
20. Food for ***immediate service only*** can be reheated to any temperature.
21. Mobile units are required to have unit permit in each county in addition to the county of origin.
22. All unwrapped foods are required to be disposed of at the end of the business day or after a maximum of 24 hours after first being on display.
23. Instructions for consumer advisory notice have been revised to remove the word “death” from its wording.
24. A new risk categorization of establishment inspection and grading system has been provided using grades A, B, C, & U based upon a numerical score.

As to the inspection report mentioned in item #24, it had been adapted from one designed by the Conference for Food Protection in 2007. Instead of dividing items into three categories as is found on the 1996 form, it divides items into two categories. Critical categories include Risk Factors and Public Health Interventions (RF/PHI) as designated by The Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Non-critical categories include items that are designated by the FDA as Good Retail Practices (GRP). More importantly, the inspection form incorporates a letter grading system rather than the numerical score that is used within the 1996 system of grading establishments. Ever since Georgia began requiring the posting of the inspection reports, it has become increasingly apparent that an overhaul of the grading system is needed. The numerical score, in actuality, means very little. Enforcement is based on the type of items marked and not the score. However in increasing numbers, the dining public do observe inspection scores solely to determine whether or not they will dine in a restaurant. For example, a score of "93" can mean that one critical item has been violated or it can mean that only two non-critical violations have been violated.

The grading system that has been in place since 2007 uses grades during a routine inspection of "A", "B", "C", and "U". Grades are based upon a numeric score range that coincides with a numeric score. The numeric score is derived by deducting from an overall score of 100 the sum of point values assigned to Risk-Factor/Public Health Intervention or (RS/PHI) Categories and Good Retail Practices or (GRPs) Categories, of which, violations were observed during a routine or follow-up inspection. Observed repeat violations are noted from the previous routine inspection and additional points are deducted from the overall numeric score.

The major changes that will be made to the current Rules of the Georgia Food Code in 2012 in order for the Chapter to be current with the science of the FDA Code are:

1. Redesignate Rule provisions as being Priority Code Provision, Priority Foundation Provision, or Core Provision according to risk with consideration given to the general and specific hazards each provision addresses.

2. Food Allergy Awareness will be required as part of food safety training for employees.
3. Frozen, commercially processed and packaged raw animal foods are exempt from separate storage or display from Ready-to-Eat (RTE) foods.
4. "Mechanically tenderized" meat must be cooked to at least 155F for 15 seconds.
5. Criteria for non-continuous cooking process added to Rule .04 entitled, "Food", to address risk associated with that process.
6. Provisions for Rule .04 will be added to exempt fish eggs that are removed from the skein and rinsed from freezing for parasite destruction.
7. Will add a definition for "cut leafy greens" to the definition of a potentially hazardous food (time/temperature control for safety food) or PHF/TCS foods. In addition, cut leafy greens will be added to the list of foods that are PHF/TCS foods.
8. Various additions, corrections, and/or deletions to address issues that have arisen since implementation of the current version of the Chapter in 2007.

A number of activities by the State Environmental Health Office concerning its food service program have been accomplished so far, since implement of the program on December 1st, 2007:

1. From March through November 2007, 500 Environmental Health Specialists (EHS) from all 159 counties in Georgia attended some 13 training classes held around the state. These classes were given through a collaborative effort with members of the State Environmental Health Food Service Program and from the Federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA). These instructional classes provided training to EHS concerning the current Georgia Food Code and along with training to do risk-based inspections, a new concept found in the 2005 FDA Model Food Code from which the Georgia Food Code was adopted. Since that time, training of EHS is continually being re-evaluated and upgraded to better serve the public interest. As a result, the State Food Service Program has cultivated a new generation of EHS that are dedicated to the reduction of the impact of foodborne illness through the maintenance of a highly skilled work force trained in risk-based assessments of food service establishments.

Also as part of this training, EHS are continued to be prepared to receive standardization certification in order to meet the one of the goals of the state's food program - to provide consistency in how food service establishments are evaluated during their inspections by EHS. This goal too was adopted from the FDA 2005 Model Food Code and it will continue with the revision of the current Georgia Food Code to future versions of the FDA Model Food Code. As part of the standardization process for EHS, the State Environmental Health Branch Office Standard-Trainers have conducted training classes to standardize EHS, who were selected by their District Environmental Health Directors, to be "District Standard-Trainers" to go out into each of their Health Districts and standardize EHS. To solidify this collaborative effort between environmental health programs at the District and State Office levels, a collaborative standardization agreement document was ratified by all 18 Health District Environmental Health Directors, signifying each Director's dedication to

promote and support Georgia's standardization protocol within their prospective districts.

Finally, in order to keep District Standard-Trainers up-to-date with the latest interpretations of Georgia's Food Code and with its standardization protocols, the Environmental Health Branch Office Standard-Trainers hold yearly educational seminars.

2. Another goal for the food program is to have all EHS standardized by December 1, 2009 which is 2 years from the formal implementation date of December 1, 2007 for the Georgia Food Code. To date, this goal has been accomplished.
3. Also in 2007, County Health Departments conducted dual inspections with their local food service establishments using the 1996 Version of the Georgia Food Code along side the revised 2007 version to help food service establishment operators to become familiarized with the requirements and inspection system for the new Code. This goal was successfully accomplished.

Further, the Georgia Food Service Industry, represented by the Georgia Restaurant Association in conjunction with County Health Departments, provided training courses on the revised 2007 Georgia Food Code in an effort to provide out reach to local food service operators. Currently, food service program training for EHS is being planned to be administered by the State Environmental Health Office on a frequent routine basis.

4. Since the implementation of the current version of Georgia's Food Code, a food technical review advisory committee has been created to review required HACCP plans as specified within the Georgia Food Code before they are put into practice.

This food technical review advisory committee continues to function to provide assistance in evaluating changes and problems that arise in the food service industry. Its decisions have been communicated to the affected party and to the county in which the establishment that submits the HACCP plan is located. Decisions will continue to be communicated statewide to all the food inspection staff to update the online Food Service Interpretation Manual with indexed interpretive memoranda. This step has enhanced the standardization of the food safety inspection program across the state, which is particularly important when interacting with chain operations.

5. An interactive training CD with written, voice and video clips, had been developed in 2006 to cover items included in the 2006 version of the Georgia Food Code. The intent of this CD was to allow Environmental Health specialist to view, at their pace, information or to learn it for the first time. The CD was to have periodic tests and quizzes to ensure that the student understands the material and to be a record that the

student satisfactorily completed the course. To carry out the same intent but with a more efficient and effective approach, a new interactive training course has been developed and will soon be placed on SABA, the DPH Office of Training and Workforce Development online training site, early in 2012 to replace the interactive training CD. In this way, Environmental Health Specialist will have immediate web access to consistently available, self-paced training and reference media concerning the Georgia Food Code.

6. As referenced in subsection (7) in Rule .02 of the Georgia Food Code, both manuals, the “Interpretation Manual for the Georgia Rules and Regulations for Food Service” and “Food Service Establishment Manual for Design, Installation and Construction”, have been posted on the DPH Environmental Health Program website for quick access by both the Food Service Industry and Environmental Health Specialists. These two Manuals will be continually updated as the current Georgia Food Code is revised to that of the current FDA Model Food Code and as food technology and safety standards change. Doing so, the Manuals will help to further unify the collaborative efforts of Georgia food service industry and the Health Authority’s efforts to enhance standardized food service inspections in throughout Georgia.
7. The current Georgia Food Code inspection report form and recording processes have been designed with a statewide computer system in mind. It has been the continued hoped that all inspection staff and support staff would have access to a real-time database management system, which will support the drive towards consistent approach. Too, the design has been pushed towards the goal of having inspectors equipped with hand-held computers to be accomplished in the not-to-distant future. This goal has not been totally reached as of yet due to some local Health Authorities not electing to participate in the DPH’s electronic health department data system known as DHD. It is hoped that all local Health Authorities in Georgia will soon decide to participate in the DHD data system.

Future goal of the state food service program:

- Recently, the Environmental Health Program has developed a statistical tool and its associated protocols to assess the state of the Georgia Food Code’s standardization efforts at the District and Statewide levels. With this tool and the DHD database management system, the DPH’s environmental health program hopes to be successful in identifying programmatic needs in training not only for foodborne illness investigation but, standardization training efforts as well. Similarly, it will be used to verify the effectiveness of the state food service program through monitoring the standardized food service inspections of EHS. It is hoped that a noticeable reduction in the occurrences of targeted risk-factors during food service inspections will occur in order to fulfill the mission of the food service program: “To Reduce the Impact of Foodborne Illness”.

It is the belief of GA DPH that the above mention goal can be accomplished. In addition, it is their belief and hope that this interpretation Manual along with its companion Manual, the “Food Service Establishment Manual for Design, Installation and Construction”, and with such activities as standardization and frequent training of EHS, will provide the necessary tools to Environmental Health Specialist to interpret the Rules and Regulations for Food Service consistently throughout Georgia. As well, it is the hope for this Manual to provide guidance to the food service industry in their endeavors to maintain compliance with Georgia’s Food Service Rules and Regulations and to maintain the highest level of food safety as possible.

About this Manual:

The “Interpretation Manual for the Georgia Rules and Regulations for Food Service” is divided into two parts, PART-I and PART-II. PART-I contains Section A and Section B collectively known as the, “Administrative Guidance to Interpretation of the Georgia Food Service Rules and Regulations Chapter 290-5-14”. PART-II contains Sections C through O collectively known as the, “Administrative Support”. A brief description of each PART-I and PART-II follows:

1. PART-I – “Administrative Guidance to Interpretation of the Georgia Food Service Rules and Regulations Chapter 290-5-14”:
 - (a.) Section A- FDA Interpretative Database: The Food Code Reference System is a searchable database that provides access to FDA’s interpretative positions and responses to questions related to the FDA Food Code. The System is a resource for stakeholders from federal agencies, state, local, territorial and tribal jurisdictions, consumers, academia, and industry interested in preventing foodborne illness and injury in retail food, vending and foodservice operations. Federal, state, local, and tribal jurisdictions will benefit from this database as they promote compliance with food safety requirements throughout the United States. *Please note some interpretations may be based on more recent versions of the Food Code. Since Georgia Food Service Rules are currently based on the 2005 FDA Model Food Code, some interpretative guidance provided may require a variance from current language in the Georgia Food Service Rules and Regulations.*
 - (b.) Section B – Public Health Reasons and Administrative Guidelines: Provides for the public health reasons and administrative guidance for the interpretation of Georgia’s Food Service Rules and Regulations Chapter 290-5-14. Section B does not address all of the Rules and Regulations within Chapter 290-5-14. However, it does address the most frequent inquiries of specific Rules and Regulations received by the Division since the adoption of the Chapter by the Department in February of 2007.

2. PART-II – “Administrative Support:

- (a) Section C – Specialty Foods: Provides resource information on some ethnic foods that EHS may encounter during food service inspections.
- (b) Section D – Conducting Risk Based Inspections: Provides guidance in conducting risk based inspections.
- (c) Section E – Foodborne Illness Investigation Procedure: Provides a reference resource for guidance in foodborne illness outbreak investigations.
- (d) Section F – Official Code of Georgia Annotated (O.C.G.A.) Title 26-2-370: Lists sections of Georgia Food Law pertinent to food service operations. By doing so, Section F will provide legal and historical basis for the Chapter.
- (e) Section G – Food Safety and the Role of the Environmental Health Specialist: This Section briefly explains the many hats that EHS wear while performing their duties to protect the public health.
- (f) Section H – Code of Conduct: This Section provides guidance in how the Environmentalist should conduct himself and or herself while performing a food service inspection.
- (g) Section I – Collaboration with Other Agencies: Provides guidance to EHS in their efforts to collaborate with other regulatory agencies in regards to the food safety program.
- (h) Section J – Administrative Procedures for Variances: Prescribes the Division of Public Health’s administrative procedures for requesting and processing requests from the food industry to vary from a particular Rule of Chapter 290-5-14.
- (i) Section K – Forms & Documents: Lists all forms and documents necessary to administratively conduct the food safety program.
- (j) Section L – Georgia Standardization Program: Provides for the guidance document as to how environmental health personnel will be standardized to do risk-based food service inspections within Georgia. It also provides for the monitoring, corrective action, and verification of the EHS standardization program.
- (k) Section M – Important Contacts: Lists of State and Federal resource contact information.

- (l) Section N – Referenced Applicable Codes of Registry: Listings of Federal Codes of Registry noted within Georgia Food Service Rules and Regulations Chapter 290-5-14.
- (m) Section O – References: List sources from which this manual was derived.