Food Handler Study Guide: Every Exam Topic (2026)

The ten topics food handler exams cover, in plain language, with the numbers to know and where they come from.

BS **Bashir Sayed** · Reviewer

Last updated: October 23, 2026

FoodHandlersCertificate.ca · www.foodhandlerscertificate.ca/resources/study-guide/ · Reviewed October 2026 · Free to print and share.

Numbers come from Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Ontario's Food Premises regulation (O. Reg. 493/17). Ontario rules are marked; your province may set its own. Your exam is written by your course provider, so study your course too.

1. Temperature control

- **Danger zone: 4°C to 60°C.** Bacteria grow quickly between these temperatures, so keep cold food cold and hot food hot (Health Canada).
- **Fridge 4°C or lower, freezer −18°C or lower** (Health Canada).
- **Ontario holding rule:** potentially hazardous food must be kept at 4°C or lower, or 60°C or higher. It may be outside that range for no more than two hours while it is being prepared (O. Reg. 493/17, s. 27).
- **Use a thermometer.** Put it in the thickest part, to the middle, not touching bone. Check each piece separately (Health Canada).

Safe internal cooking temperatures (Health Canada):

FOOD	COOK TO AT LEAST
Ground beef, veal, lamb and pork (burgers, sausages)	71°C
Beef, veal and lamb pieces and whole cuts, medium-rare	63°C
Pork pieces and whole cuts	71°C
Poultry pieces, ground poultry and stuffing	74°C
Whole poultry	82°C
Egg dishes	74°C
Fish	70°C
Shellfish and crustaceans	74°C
Leftovers and hot dogs	74°C

2. Foodborne illness

- **About 4 million Canadians (1 in 8)** get a foodborne illness each year, with about 11,600 hospitalizations and 238 deaths (Public Health Agency of Canada).
- **At least 30 bacteria, parasites and viruses** are known to cause foodborne illness. These are called pathogens (PHAC).
- **Most common known causes:** norovirus (about 65% of illnesses with a known cause), *Clostridium perfringens*, *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella* (PHAC).
- **Common signs:** vomiting and diarrhea.
- **Stay away from food when you are sick.** Ontario requires food handlers to be free from any infectious agent of a disease that can spread through food (O. Reg. 493/17, s. 33).

3. Cross-contamination

Cross-contamination is when bacteria move from one food or surface to another, most often from raw meat to ready-to-eat food.

- Use separate cutting boards for produce and raw meat (Health Canada).
- If a plate or utensil touched raw food, wash it thoroughly before using it again (Health Canada).
- Keep raw meat, poultry, fish and seafood separate from other food in the fridge (Health Canada).
- Sanitize counters, cutting boards and utensils before and after preparing food (Health Canada).

4. Personal hygiene

Ontario's regulation (O. Reg. 493/17, s. 33) says every food handler must:

- not use tobacco while working as a food handler;
- be clean, practise good personal hygiene and wear clean outer clothing;
- take reasonable steps so hair does not get into food;
- wash hands as often as needed to keep food and food areas from being contaminated;
- be free from any infectious agent of a disease that can spread through food.

Health Canada says to wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds, before and after you touch raw meat.

5. Cleaning and sanitizing

Cleaning removes dirt and food. Sanitizing kills the germs that are left. Clean first, then sanitize.

Ontario's approved ways to sanitize utensils (O. Reg. 493/17, s. 19):

METHOD	STRENGTH, TEMPERATURE AND TIME
Hot water	At least 77°C for at least 45 seconds
Chlorine	At least 100 ppm, at 24°C or warmer, for at least 45 seconds
Quaternary ammonium	At least 200 ppm, at 24°C or warmer, for at least 45 seconds
Iodine	At least 25 ppm, at 24°C or warmer, for at least 45 seconds

- **Dishwashers in Ontario:** wash water between 60°C and 71°C, and a hot-water sanitizing rinse of at least 82°C for at least 10 seconds, or an approved chemical rinse (s. 20).
- Other sanitizers are allowed if they are approved by Health Canada, CFIA or the medical officer of health, and used as directed (s. 19).

6. Receiving and storage

- Check deliveries: cold food should be at 4°C or lower and frozen food should still be frozen.
- Put cold and frozen food away quickly: fridge at 4°C or lower, freezer at -18°C or lower (Health Canada).
- Fridges and hot-holding units must be big enough to hold food at the right temperature and have an accurate, easy-to-read thermometer (Ontario, s. 30).
- Store food on racks, shelves or pallets that protect it and are easy to clean (Ontario, s. 31).
- Use older stock first ("first in, first out") and keep raw meat, poultry and seafood away from ready-to-eat food.

7. HACCP

HACCP stands for Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point. It is a way to find and control food safety hazards before they cause harm.

- **Hazards** can be biological (bacteria, viruses, parasites), chemical or physical (CFIA).
- **A critical control point (CCP)** is "a step in your process where a control measure with clear critical limit(s) is essential to control a significant hazard" (CFIA). Cooking to a safe temperature is a common example.
- **Critical limits** are the measurable values, such as a temperature, that separate safe from unsafe (CFIA).
- You monitor each CCP and take corrective action when a critical limit is not met.

8. Allergens

Health Canada lists these **priority food allergens**:

- Eggs
- Milk
- Mustard
- Peanuts
- Crustaceans and molluscs
- Fish
- Sesame seeds
- Soy
- Sulphites
- Tree nuts
- Wheat and triticale

A severe reaction (anaphylaxis) can be life-threatening. Know what is in every dish, keep allergen-free food separate, and clean surfaces and utensils between uses.

9. Pest control

- Every food premise must be protected against pests getting in, and kept free of conditions where pests can hide or breed (Ontario, s. 13(1)).
- The operator must keep records of all pest control measures for at least one year (Ontario, s. 13(2)).
- Signs of pests include droppings, gnaw marks and nests. Report them right away.

10. The law

- Each province and territory sets its own food handler rules, usually in a food premises regulation. See the rules in all 13 provinces and territories.
- In Ontario, at least one trained food handler or supervisor must be on site during every hour a food service premise is open (O. Reg. 493/17, s. 32).
- In British Columbia, operators need FOODSAFE Level 1 or an equivalent (B.C. Reg. 210/99, s. 10). See FOODSAFE Level 1 vs food handler certificate.
- Local public health inspectors check that food premises follow the rules.

Sources

- **Health Canada:** Safe cooking temperatures (https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/general-food-safety-tips/safe-internal-cooking-temperatures.html) (handwashing, thermometers, cross-contamination), Safe food storage (https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/general-food-safety-tips/safe-food-storage.html) and Common food allergens (https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/food-safety/food-allergies-intolerances/food-allergies.html).
- **Public Health Agency of Canada:** Yearly food-borne illness estimates (https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/food-borne-illness-canada/yearly-food-borne-illness-estimates-canada.html) and Causes of food-borne illness (https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/food-borne-illness-canada/causes-food-borne-illness-canada.html).
- **Canadian Food Inspection Agency:** Determining critical control points and their critical limits (https://inspection.canada.ca/en/food-safety-industry/preventive-control-plans/critical-control-points).
- **Government of Ontario:** O. Reg. 493/17, Food Premises (https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/170493), ss. 13, 19, 20, 27, 30 to 33.

All checked October 2026. **Test yourself with the free practice test**

Last reviewed: October 2026