

# Food Safety and Food Handler Permits in West Virginia

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Food handler training and permitting are employed by many states to ensure that individuals preparing food commercially are educated in food safety. Foodborne illnesses, commonly known as “food poisoning,” come from a number of sources and can result in severe dehydration, making them especially dangerous for pregnant individuals, children, and the elderly.

During food handler training, individuals learn how to mitigate the risk of foodborne illness through frequent handwashing and surface disinfection, washing fruits and vegetables, separating food during shopping, storage, and preparation, and proper cooking and refrigeration. These principles are especially critical in restaurant settings, as a single tray of improperly prepared food can lead to dozens of cases of foodborne illness.

This Science and Technology Note details the state of foodborne illness and food safety standards in West Virginia and discusses the challenges and opportunities in the current food handler permit process.

## Foodborne Illness Outbreaks by State (2009-2021)

State	Number of Outbreaks	State-required food handler card?
West Virginia	67	Yes, for all employees
Kentucky	136	No, but individual counties/employers may require
Maryland	96	No, but recommended and employer may require
Ohio	889	Yes, only for the person in charge (one required on site per shift)
Pennsylvania	350	No, but recommended and employer may require
Tennessee	295	No, but recommended and employer may require
Virginia	115	No, but recommended and employer may require

Source: [CDC National Outbreak Reporting System](#)

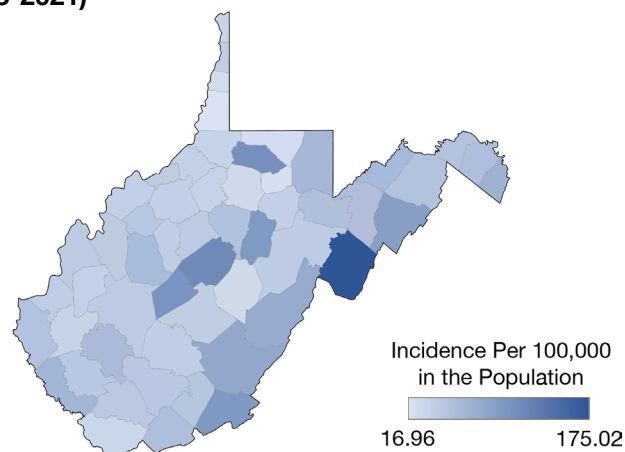
## Research Highlights

- Foodborne illness comes from contamination of food with germs commonly found in the fecal matter of animals, including cattle, swine, and poultry. From 2009 to 2021, over [8,000](#) West Virginians reported a foodborne illness; [1,500](#) were hospitalized, and [42](#) died from their illness.
- West Virginia’s rate of foodborne illness is below the national average, including the rate of infections originating from restaurants.
- Food handler training and permits (currently required by [West Virginia §16-2-16](#)) educate those preparing food at restaurants on proper precautions to prevent foodborne illness.

## Foodborne Illness in West Virginia

From 2009 to 2021, over [8,000](#) West Virginians reported foodborne illnesses; [1,500](#) were hospitalized, and [42](#) died from their illness. In that same timeframe, West Virginia had [67 outbreaks](#) of foodborne illness, significantly fewer than the national average of [90](#) and the lowest of any surrounding state. [Less than 50%](#) of foodborne illness cases in West Virginia are restaurant-related, compared to [59%](#) nationally.

## Enteric Illness\* (Food Poisoning) Incidence by County (2018-2021)



\*These data include foodborne and waterborne sources of illness.  
 Source: Adapted from [West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources](#)

## Food Handler Training Requirements in West Virginia

[West Virginia §16-2-16](#) requires local county health departments to regulate food handler permits under the following limitations:

- permit must be valid for at least 1 year but no more than 3 years
- permit must be obtained within 30 days of employment when required
- for an additional fee of no more than \$10, the permit shall be valid in all counties of the state

Local health departments determine the fees and training requirements, which may include an in-person course or a number of nationally-recognized online training programs. These programs cover the danger of foodborne illness and how to prevent it; personal hygiene; food safety, including contamination sources, proper time and temperature control, food receiving, storage, preparation, serving, cooling, and reheating; and pest management. There are more stringent requirements for managers and supervisors, and at least one individual with this advanced training must be on site for each shift. Course fees are typically paid by the trainee rather than the employer.

### Food Handler Training Programs In Select West Virginia Counties (2024)

County	Fee	Accepted	Location	Expiration
<a href="#">Cabell</a>	Free	Statewide	On site	3 years
	\$20	Statewide	Online	3 years
<a href="#">Clay</a>	\$10	County only	On site	2 years
	\$20	County only	Online	2 years
	\$20	Statewide	On site	2 years
	\$30	Statewide	Online	2 years
<a href="#">Pendleton</a>	\$10	County only	On site*	3 years
	\$15	County only	Online	3 years
	\$20	Statewide	On site*	3 years
	\$25	Statewide	Online	3 years

\*usually only offered in May, June, and July

Source: County websites with verbal confirmation, February 2024

## West Virginia Food Handlers Permit Opportunities and Challenges

West Virginia Code [§16-2-16](#) allows each county flexibility in how they manage food handler training and permits. This can create opportunities and challenges for food handlers and their employers in the following areas:

- 1. Statewide Food Handler Card Portability.** Many county trainings offer food handler permits that are valid in all West Virginia counties, usually as part of their standard offering or for a small additional fee. This allowance enables individuals to move to new areas of the state without needing to repeat similar training or pay the fee again. However, given the flexibility in the law, it is uncertain whether every county offers statewide permits. One policy option to reduce uncertainty for food handlers would be for the West Virginia legislature to require that all offered permits be valid statewide.
- 2. Food Handler Card Expiration.** Under the current state policy, food handler cards expire in 1-3 years at the discretion of the county providing the training. Some have proposed eliminating this expiration requirement; however, [research](#) has found that routine refresher training in food safety is essential to maintaining good food handler knowledge and behaviors. As is the case with portability, mandating a specific time period for food handler card expiration statewide would reduce uncertainty.
- 3. Food Handler Card Fees and Curriculum.** Counties also have flexibility in the course format and fee structure, which may create equity issues for West Virginians seeking a food handler permit. For example, the training and permit fees can vary from \$0 to \$30, depending on the county. As food handler permits are often required before an individual has earned their first paycheck, the fees may pose a financial challenge for those workers. Similarly, there are inequities related to access to a reliable internet connection or transportation to enroll and participate in a course, which is a concern in rural counties particularly. One policy option to mitigate these inequities would be for the employer to pay for the employee's training and provide or fund transportation to the training site.

This Science & Technology Note was written by Kensey Bergdorf-Smith, PhD, West Virginia Science and Technology Policy Fellow on behalf of West Virginia University's Bridge Initiative for Science and Technology Policy, Leadership, and Communications. Please see <https://scitechpolicy.wvu.edu/> or contact [scitechpolicy@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:scitechpolicy@mail.wvu.edu) for more information.

