



TRI-COUNTY MECHANICAL

PANIC PACK • 30-DAY PLAN

THE WALK-IN IS WARMING UP

The Restaurant Owner's Save-the-Inventory Plan

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Middle Tennessee**02 THE EMERGENCY**

THE THERMOMETER IS CLIMBING

It's busy. Someone says, "The walk-in feels warm." You check. The number is going the wrong way.

A lot of your money is sitting in that box as food. Here's what to do.

◆ RIGHT NOW, IN THIS ORDER

- 1 Close the door.** Keep it closed.
- 2 Check the temperature** of the air *and* of a few foods.
- 3 Run the 15-minute triage** on Page 7.
- 4 Protect the most at-risk food first.**
- 5 Write everything down:** time, temperature, what you did.

◆ YOUR 30-DAY PLAN**FIRST
24h**

Triage, move food, log temps, know when to call

**WEEK
1**

Twice-daily temp log and door/gasket checks

**WEEK
2**

Clean the condenser coil, check airflow and defrost

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3**

Train staff habits

**WEEK
4**Review your logs and decide what needs a
technician**SAFETY FIRST**

Turn off power before touching fans or coils.
Never chip ice off coils with a knife or sharp tool.
Leave wiring and refrigerant to an **EPA Section
608-certified** technician.

NEXT UP → 04 The Line: 41°F Cooler / 0°F Freezer

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04 THE BASICS

THE LINE: 41°F COOLER / 0°F FREEZER



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◆ THE NUMBER THAT MATTERS

The FDA Food Code says cold food that needs temperature control for safety must be held at **41°F (5°C) or below**.

Walk-in freezers: Keep frozen food at **0°F (–18°C) or below**, and keep it frozen. Softening product is an early warning.

That includes things like:

- Raw meat, poultry and seafood
- Milk, cheese and other dairy
- Cooked rice, beans, pasta and potatoes
- Cut melons, cut leafy greens and cut tomatoes
- Cooked foods and sauces

◆ AIR TEMP VS. FOOD TEMP

WHAT YOU MEASURE	WHY IT MATTERS
Air temperature (thermometer in the warmest part of the walk-in)	Your early warning. Air warms first.
Food temperature (probe thermometer in the food)	What the health rules care about.



TIP

Many operators set walk-ins a few degrees below 41°F so there's a cushion when the door opens. Check your unit's manual for its normal set point.

What about food that got warm? Rules for throwing food away can differ by place. Before an emergency, call your health department and ask:

- "How long can cold food be above 41°F before I must throw it out?"

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- "What records do you want me to keep?"

Write their answer here: _____

Tennessee's 4-hour / 6-hour "time as a public health control" (TPHC) rule is a **planned procedure** with written steps — not a discard clock for a walk-in failure. Discard decisions still go to your health department.

When in doubt, throw it out. Food that may be unsafe is never worth the risk.

Source: FDA Food Code 2022 §3-501.16 (cold holding at 41°F / 5°C or below). USDA FSIS: freezer at 0°F (–18°C) or below. Your local health department's rules come first.

NEXT UP → 07 First 24 Hours: The 15-Minute Triage

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07 FIRST 24 HOURS

THE 15-MINUTE TRIAGE

◆ STEP 1: LOOK AND LISTEN (5 MINUTES)

CHECK	WHAT "BAD" LOOKS LIKE	DONE
Door	Doesn't close or latch by itself; propped open	
Gaskets (rubber seals)	Torn, flat, gaps, ice on the edges	
Strip curtain	Missing, torn or tied back	
Evaporator (fan box inside)	Fans not spinning; coil covered in ice	
Airflow	Boxes stacked in front of or right up to the fan box	
Condenser (outside or on top)	Fan not spinning; coil caked with dust or grease; blocked by stuff	
Breaker / disconnect	Tripped or off	
Thermostat	Bumped to a warmer setting	

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◆ STEP 2: EASY FIXES YOU CAN TRY (5 MINUTES)

- ☐ Close and latch the door. Hang up the strip curtain.
- ☐ Move boxes so air can flow around the fan box.
- ☐ Clear anything blocking the condenser.
- ☐ If a breaker is tripped, reset it **once**. If it trips again, leave it off and call.

◆ STEP 3: PROTECT THE FOOD (5 MINUTES)

- ☐ Take food temps (probe) on 3–5 items: one near the door, one up high, one in the middle
- ☐ Move the most at-risk foods (raw meat, seafood, dairy, cooked food) to a working cooler first
- ☐ Use ice or reach-ins if you have room. Don't overload them.
- ☐ **Never put dry ice or CO₂ in a closed walk-in** (asphyxiation risk).
- ☐ Ask your tech or supplier about a temporary refrigerated trailer if it's a big load

Step 4: Log it Write the time, air temp and food temps every 30 minutes until it's fixed (log on Page 20).

Call a technician now if the temperature keeps climbing after these steps, or you see anything on Page 17.

NEXT UP → 09 Week 1: Twice-Daily Temperature Log and Door Checks

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09 WEEK 1

TWICE-DAILY TEMPERATURE LOG AND DOOR CHECKS

The fix starts with knowing your numbers.

◆ EVERY DAY: OPEN AND CLOSE

- ☐ Read the walk-in thermometer and write it down
- ☐ Probe one food item and write it down
- ☐ Initial it

◆ THERMOMETER CHECK (ONCE THIS WEEK)

- ☐ Is there a thermometer inside, in the warmest spot (usually near the door)?
- ☐ Does it read right? Test your probe thermometer in ice water. It should read 32°F. Adjust or replace it if not.
- ☐ The FDA Food Code says air thermometers that read only in Fahrenheit must be accurate to within $\pm 3^{\circ}\text{F}$ ($\pm 1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ for Celsius or dual-scale ones).

◆ DOOR AND GASKET CHECK (EVERY DAY THIS WEEK)

- ☐ Door swings shut and latches by itself
- ☐ **Dollar-bill test:** close the door on a dollar bill. If it slides out easily, the seal may be weak there. Try it all the way around.

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Middle Tennessee☐ Gaskets aren't torn, cracked or flat☐ No frost or ice around the door frame☐ Strip curtain is whole and hanging down☐ Inside safety release works (so no one gets trapped)

Write down every problem with the date. Small problems now save big repair bills later.

NEXT UP → 11 Week 2: Coils, Airflow and Defrost

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Clean the condenser coil (the coil that gets rid of heat, usually outside or on top) A dirty condenser coil makes the system work harder.

1**Turn off the power** at the disconnect.**2**

Remove leaves, trash and anything stacked nearby.

3

Gently brush or vacuum dust off the fins (brush the same direction as the fins).

4

If it's greasy, use a coil cleaner made for the job and follow the label.

5

Don't bend the fins. Don't use a pressure washer unless the maker says it's OK.

6

Turn the power back on. Make sure the fan spins.

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Not comfortable doing this? That's fine. It's a normal maintenance visit.

◆ CHECK AIRFLOW INSIDE

- ☐ Leave space between boxes and walls
- ☐ Keep boxes off the floor and away from the fan box
- ☐ Don't block the fans with tall stacks

Check defrost Evaporator coils need to defrost so ice doesn't block air.

- ☐ Look at the coil: a light frost is normal. A solid block of ice is not.
- ☐ Notice when temps spike. A short rise during defrost can be normal. A rise that doesn't come back down is a problem.
- ☐ If you see heavy ice, **don't chip it**. Call a tech.

NEXT UP → 13 Week 3: Staff Habits

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13 WEEK 3

STAFF HABITS

Most walk-in trouble gets worse because of small habits.
Week 3 makes good habits automatic.

◆ 5 DAILY HABITS THAT REDUCE STRAIN ON YOUR WALK-IN

HABIT	WHY
1. Door closed, always. No propping.	Every minute open lets warm air in.
2. Plan the trip. Grab everything in one go.	Fewer door openings.
3. Put deliveries away fast. Cold items first.	Warm product and an open door add heat.
4. Cool hot food before it goes in, using your approved cooling method.	Hot pans warm the whole box.
5. Keep the fan box and walls clear.	Air has to move to keep things cold.

◆ OPENING CHECKLIST (FIRST PERSON IN)

☐ Read and log walk-in temp

☐ Door closes and latches

☐ Strip curtain down

☐ Nothing blocking the fan box

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Middle Tennessee**◆ CLOSING CHECKLIST (LAST PERSON OUT)**☐ Read and log walk-in
temp☐ Door shut tight☐ Light off☐ Deliveries all put away

Post these checklists on the walk-in door.

NEXT UP → 15 Week 4: Review Your Logs

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15 WEEK 4

REVIEW YOUR LOGS

Lay out your 3 weeks of temperature logs. Look for patterns.

ASK THESE QUESTIONS

QUESTION	YES / NO	WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN
Is it warmer after deliveries?		Door open too long or put-away habits
Is it warmer during busy hours?		Too many door openings, weak gaskets
Is it warmer on hot afternoons?		Condenser struggling with outside heat or dirty coil
Is it climbing slowly, day after day?		Possible refrigerant, fan or part problem
Is there ice on the coil again?		Defrost or airflow problem
Any cooler reading above 41°F?		Needs action now
Any freezer reading above 0°F, or soft product?		Needs action now

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◆ SORT WHAT YOU FOUND

YOU CAN HANDLE IT	NEEDS A TECHNICIAN
Door habits, strip curtain, stacking	Ice building on the coil again
Cleaning the condenser coil	Fan motors not running
Replacing a simple door gasket (if your maker sells a fit)	Compressor problems, short cycling
Staff training	Refrigerant leaks
	Electrical trips or burning smells

If anything is in the right column, schedule a visit before it becomes an emergency. Refrigerant work must be done by an EPA Section 608–certified technician.

NEXT UP → 17 The "Call Now" List

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17 CALL NOW

THE "CALL NOW" LIST

◆ CALL A REFRIGERATION TECHNICIAN RIGHT AWAY IF YOU SEE:

- ☐ Cooler air temp above 41°F and still rising after your triage
- ☐ Freezer air well above 0°F, or frozen product softening
- ☐ The compressor (outside unit) not running, or clicking on and off over and over
- ☐ Condenser or evaporator fans not spinning
- ☐ A solid block of ice on the evaporator coil
- ☐ A breaker that trips again after one reset
- ☐ A burning smell, smoke or buzzing from the unit
- ☐ Loud grinding, banging or squealing noises
- ☐ Oily spots on refrigerant lines or fittings (can be a leak sign)
- ☐ Water pooling on the floor or ice on the walk-in floor
- ☐ The door won't close or latch, or the inside release is broken

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service tcm-hvac.com Brush Creek, TN ·
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- ☐ Keep the door closed
- ☐ Keep moving at-risk food to working coolers
- ☐ Keep logging temps every 30 minutes
- ☐ Don't open panels, touch wiring or add refrigerant (EPA Section 608 — certified techs only)
- ☐ Never put dry ice or CO₂ in a closed walk-in

NEXT UP → 19 Scripts

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19 SCRIPTS

SCRIPTS

◆ STAFF HUDDLE SCRIPT (2 MINUTES)

“Quick huddle. Our walk-in has been running warm, and we want to protect our food. Starting today: 1. The door stays closed. No propping. 2. Plan your trips. Grab everything at once. 3. Deliveries go away right away, cold stuff first. 4. Log the temp at open and close, and initial it. 5. If a cooler reads above 41°F, or a freezer is above 0°F / product is soft, tell a manager right away. Thanks. This keeps our food safe and saves us money.”

◆ WHAT TO TELL YOUR TECH ON THE PHONE

“Hi, this is [name] at [restaurant], [address]. Our walk-in [cooler / freezer] is at [temp]°F and [rising / steady]. It started around [time]. Here's what I've noticed: - Compressor outside is [running / not running / clicking] - Fans inside are [running / not running] - Coil is [clear / iced up] - Breaker is [OK / tripped] - Unit make and model: [from the data plate] We've moved [what food] and we're logging temps. How soon can someone come out?”



TIP

Snap a photo of the data plate on the condenser and evaporator now, before you ever need it.

NEXT UP → 20 Templates: Temperature Log and Owner Checklist

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20 TEMPLATES



TEMPLATES: TEMPERATURE LOG AND OWNER CHECKLIST

◆ WALK-IN TEMPERATURE LOG

DATE	TIME	AIR TEMP (°F)	FOOD PROBE TEMP (°F)	ITEM PROBED	INITIALS	NOTES / ACTION TAKEN
						Open
						Close
						Open
						Close

Cooler above 41°F, or freezer above 0°F / soft product? Tell a manager right away. Write what you did.

◆ OWNER CHECKLIST

DAILY	DONE
Temps logged at open and close	
Door closes and latches	
Strip curtain in place	
Fan box clear	

WEEKLY	DONE
Review temp log for any cooler reading above 41°F or freezer above 0°F	
Dollar-bill test on gaskets	

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WEEKLY

DONE

- Look at evaporator coil for heavy ice
- Clear area around condenser
- Probe thermometer checked in ice water

MONTHLY

DONE

- Look at condenser coil; clean if dusty or greasy
- Review 30 days of logs for patterns
- Check inside safety release

NEXT UP → 22 Scorecard: Refrigeration Health

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HEALTH**

Give yourself 1 point for each "yes."

- ☐ 1. My walk-in has a working thermometer in the warmest spot
- ☐ 2. Temps are logged at open and close every day
- ☐ 3. No cooler reading above 41°F, and no freezer reading above 0°F, in the last 30 days
- ☐ 4. Door closes and latches by itself
- ☐ 5. Gaskets pass the dollar-bill test all the way around
- ☐ 6. Strip curtain is whole and in use
- ☐ 7. No heavy ice on the evaporator coil
- ☐ 8. Condenser coil is clean
- ☐ 9. Area around the condenser is clear
- ☐ 10. Airflow inside isn't blocked
- ☐ 11. Staff know the 5 daily habits
- ☐ 12. Opening and closing checklists are posted

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- ☐ 13. I know my health department's rule for warm food
- ☐ 14. I have my tech's number and my unit's model info ready
- ☐ 15. My walk-in has had a professional maintenance visit in the last 12 months

SCORE WHAT IT MEANS

13–15	Healthy. Keep the routine going.
8–12	Some weak spots. Fix the "no" items this month.
0–7	At risk. Schedule a professional check soon.

**ONE HONEST NOTE**

These 30 days fix the symptom. Coils get dirty again, parts wear out and summers get hot. Routine maintenance helps prevent breakdowns and the next emergency.

NEXT UP → 24 Call 24/7 or Schedule Service

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**24 YOUR NEXT STEP****CALL 24/7 OR SCHEDULE
SERVICE**

You've protected your food and built better habits. If your walk-in is still struggling, or anything on the "Call Now" list (Page 17) shows up, get a pro to look at it.

◆ **TRI-COUNTY MECHANICAL SERVICES COMMERCIAL REFRIGERATION AND WALK-IN COOLERS.**

◆ **TWO WAYS TO REACH US**

- **Emergency?** Call **(931) 356-7776**. We offer 24/7 emergency service.
- **Not an emergency?** Schedule service at <https://tcm-hvac.com/contact/> or email info@tcm-hvac.com.

Have your temperature log and your unit's model info ready (see Page 19). It helps the technician get started faster.

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Middle Tennessee**◆ ABOUT US**

- Tri-County Mechanical, 5 Paulk Lane, Brush Creek, TN 38547
- Licensed and insured
- Serving Smith, DeKalb, Wilson, Rutherford, Williamson, Sumner and Davidson counties, Tennessee

Routine maintenance helps prevent breakdowns. Ask us about it when you call.

This guide shares general information. Always follow your local health department's rules and your equipment maker's instructions.