

Refrigeration cleaning and maintenance: a kit for your customers and technicians

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The daily, weekly, monthly and twice-a-year tasks that keep commercial refrigerators cold, efficient and covered by warranty, with a checklist you can hand over at delivery.

Key takeaways: A dirty condenser coil causes many avoidable failures and higher power bills. Clean it every month. • Wash door gaskets every week and check that they seal. • Units with R-290 (propane) refrigerant need a technician trained for flammable refrigerants for any sealed-system repair.

For a distributor, the months after delivery decide whether a customer orders again. In a commercial kitchen, many refrigeration service calls trace back to a short list of tasks nobody did: a condenser full of grease and dust, a torn door gasket, a unit pushed against the wall.

This guide puts those tasks in one place. Share it with your customers when you deliver, print the checklist at the end for their kitchen, and use it to train your technicians. Always follow the manual that comes with each unit when it says something different.

1. Before day one: installation

Most of the problems that show up in the first months start with the installation.

- **Let it rest.** After transport, keep the unit upright and unplugged for the time the manual asks. Many manufacturers ask for 24 hours so the compressor oil settles.
- **Give it air.** Install it indoors, on a level floor, with the clearance the manual asks for at the back (often about 4 in / 10 cm). Keep it away from fryers, ranges, ovens and dishwashers.
- **Power.** Use a dedicated, grounded outlet with the voltage on the nameplate. No extension cords.
- **Set up first, load later.** Install shelves, clips and casters before plugging it in, and wait until the cabinet reaches temperature before loading food.
- **Restarting.** If someone unplugs the unit, wait at least 10 minutes before plugging it back in, to protect the compressor.

2. Every day

- **Check and record the temperature,** at opening and in the afternoon. The FDA Food Code, which many jurisdictions adopt, sets cold holding for time/temperature control for safety (TCS) foods at 41°F (5°C) or below. Follow the rule that applies in your market.
- **Keep the air moving.** Do not block the vents or the evaporator inside the cabinet. Leave space between food and the evaporator housing (about 4 in / 10 cm).
- **Keep doors closed** and wipe spills inside the cabinet and on the gaskets the same day.

3. Every week

- **Door gaskets.** Remove them, soak them in warm soapy water, dry them with a soft cloth and refit them. Check that they seal along the whole door. Food and drink residue causes mold, and mold makes gaskets stick and tear.
- **Interior.** Clean with warm water and mild soap. Remove shelves and pilasters from time to time and wash them the same way.
- **Avoid harsh products.** No steel wool, abrasive cleaners, caustic soap or bleach. They damage stainless steel and shorten gasket life.

4. Every month: the condenser coil

The condenser pulls in kitchen air all day, with its dust, lint and grease. When the fins clog, the compressor runs longer and hotter. ENERGY STAR cites a 2014 study in which basic condenser coil cleaning cut energy use by 17% on average.

- Unplug the unit and remove the grille to reach the condenser.
- Brush the fins from top to bottom with a stiff brush, then vacuum the dirt from the coil and the floor of the compartment. Use a commercial coil cleaner if the coil is greasy.
- Straighten bent fins with a fin comb. You should be able to see light through the coil.
- Clean the condenser fan blades with a soft cloth. If you wash them, cover the motor.
- Do not place filter material in front of the coil. It blocks the air the same way dirt does.

In greasy or dusty kitchens, clean the coil more often than once a month.

5. Every six months: technician visit

ENERGY STAR suggests professional cleaning of reach-ins, under-counters and ice makers about every six months, and more often in hot, greasy or busy kitchens. A preventive visit usually covers:

- checking and calibrating the thermostat or controller;
- cleaning the evaporator coil and fans and checking the defrost;
- checking electrical connections, door hinges and closers;
- replacing gaskets that no longer seal.

R-290 (propane) units. Many current commercial refrigerators use R-290, a flammable refrigerant. Any work on the sealed system should be done by a technician trained for flammable refrigerants: gas detector on, good ventilation, no open flames and spark-free tools. Nobody should use sharp tools to remove ice or puncture refrigerant tubing.

6. Stainless steel care

- Use soft cloths or plastic scouring pads, and clean along the polish lines.
- Use alkaline or non-chloride cleaners. If you use a chlorinated cleaner, rinse and dry right away.
- Never use hydrochloric (muriatic) acid, steel wool or wire brushes.

Guide 12 covers stainless steel and gas equipment care in more detail.

7. Quick checks before calling service

Symptom	Check first
Unit does not run	Breaker or fuse, plug, thermostat setting. The unit may be in a defrost cycle: wait for it to finish.
Runs for long periods or cabinet too warm	Door left open, gaskets not sealing, dirty condenser, warm product just loaded, airflow blocked inside, evaporator iced over (unplug to defrost and check gaskets).
Noisy	Floor not level, loose parts, tubing touching other parts.

8. How to use this kit as a distributor

- **At delivery**, hand over the user manual with this guide and show the customer where the condenser is.
- **Warranty**. Many manufacturer warranties exclude failures caused by a dirty condenser or poor ventilation. Check the terms on your line and explain them to your customer from day one.
- **A service line**. A preventive maintenance plan every six months keeps units running and gives you a reason to visit your customers.
- **Parts on the shelf**. Keep door gaskets, fan motors and controllers in stock for the models you sell.

Printable checklist

When	Task
Every day	Record the temperature (open and afternoon) Keep vents clear and doors closed Wipe spills on the same day
Every week	Wash and refit door gaskets; check the seal Clean the interior with warm water and mild soap
Every month	Unplug and clean the condenser coil and fan Straighten bent fins
Every 6 months	Technician visit: controller, evaporator, defrost, electrical, gaskets R-290 units: technician trained for flammable refrigerants

PGP supplies each refrigeration line with user manuals, exploded views and spare parts by part number, so your technicians have what they need after the sale.

Sources

- [ENERGY STAR – How to reduce refrigeration energy costs in commercial kitchens](#)
- [U.S. FDA – Food Code 2022](#)
- [ACHR News – Best practices for the safe handling of R-290](#)

This guide is general information. Always follow the manual of each unit and the food safety rules that apply in your market.