

Unannounced Assessments according to the IFS Food Standard

The new benchmarking requirements of the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) made unannounced assessments mandatory in 2021. In the primary sector, at least **10%** of annual assessments must be conducted unannounced. In the other sectors, unannounced assessments must be conducted **every 3 years**.

Unannounced assessments improve customer trust because they contribute to demonstrating that the certified organizations apply their food safety management system (FSMS) every day and maintain the proper culture surrounding food safety.

Obligation to Unannounced Assessments for Producers

Since January 1, 2021, at least one of three consecutive assessments must be unannounced. This applies to all standards approved by GFSI (Global Food Safety Initiative), such as IFS Food, IFS Logistics, BRCGS Food, FSSC 22000.

Procedure of an Unannounced Assessment

A. Obligatory unannounced assessment Procedure

The certifying body informs the producer of a time window, in which an unannounced assessment must occur. However, the certifying body will not provide a precise date or time within this time window. The auditor visits the company unannounced and will start his or her assessment of the production no later than 30 minutes after his/her arrival. The date of the assessment must be entered into the IFS database within two days after the audit start. In this way, customers are informed via the portal about the maintenance of certification according to IFS-procedures.

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B. Voluntary unannounced assessment Procedure

Companies may continue to participate in the voluntary unannounced assessment procedure.

According to IFS requirements, the application for the participation in the voluntary unannounced assessment procedure must be filed no later than 20 weeks before the expiration of the existing certificate. After that, the audit can no longer be registered as unannounced in the IFS database. However, to comply with these deadlines, TÜV NORD CERT GmbH completes the registration no later than 24 weeks before the expiration of the existing certificate. Applications filed after the deadline cannot be considered. In case of late applications, the assessment will be conducted according to the regular, announced procedure.

Difference between Food Check Assessments and Unannounced Assessments

The Food Check Assessment is a contractual agreement between the standard-setting body and the producer. An auditor of the IFS Management GmbH conducts an audit with a reduced scope of assessment. Objects of the assessment include the areas of hygiene (operational, staff and process hygiene) and other subjects like traceability. The result of a food check is either “passed” or “failed”. In case of unannounced IFS Food assessments, a contract is made between the auditing body and the producer. A full assessment is conducted.

	IFS Food Check Assessment	Unannounced Assessment
Contractual basis	Direct contract with IFS	Direct contract with the certifying body, TÜV NORD CERT
Auditor	Auditor of IFS Management GmbH	Auditor of TÜV NORD CERT
Scope of Assessment	Limited to hygiene, traceability and others	Full assessment
Result	Passed or failed	Report on assessment results and a certificate, in case of a positive result

The evaluation according to IFS Food follows the same rules as announced assessments. Onsite time is calculated the same way as with previous assessments.

Producers' Reporting Obligations

As a producer, you are obligated to convey all the information important for conducting an unannounced assessment, in writing and in time to the certifying body.

The current IFS-doctrine from June 2021 specifies that the latest registration day for the unannounced assessment, in case of both options, is three months prior to the last day of the permissible time window of the unannounced assessment.

At this date, if applicable, the certifying body must be informed about the ten blocked days, on which no assessment is to take place. In addition, onsite contact persons for the auditor must be identified, in order to obtain necessary information and to gain access to the company premises. If these requirements are met, the audit can go forward. Important documents, such as hygiene requirements for visitors, must be made available ahead of time, so that quick access to the production facilities can be ensured.

The following **documents** must be made available to the certifying body before the potential assessment time window:

- List of products and processes
- HACCP
- Layout floor plan
- Zones (structure, definition, e.g., for particularly sensitive products, plus product groups for the zones)
- Personnel and material flow charts
- Type and scope of preventive measures

Procedure of unannounced Audits



1 You send us the form specifying the blocked days for your organization.



2 We inform you about the maximum time slot for the unannounced audit and specify the auditor and the audit costs.



3 Onsite unannounced assessment.



4 Evaluation of the action plan by TÜV NORD



5 Report and certificate



6 Upload to the IFS database



FAQs: Frequently asked questions regarding unannounced assessments

Will our usual auditor conduct the unannounced assessment?

We try to mainly use auditors from your region, in order to optimize travel expenses. Of course, auditors have to fulfill certain scopes. Therefore, it is possible that a familiar auditor conducts the audit. However, certain planning procedures will also make it necessary to use different employees.

All of our auditors have sound industry knowledge and follow an interdisciplinary approach. They must undergo an intensive annual training program to keep their qualifications current. Therefore, you can expect a consistent level of quality.

What happens if we don't grant the auditor access to our company?

Please try to prevent such a scenario at all cost. In this case, the certifying body is obligated to deactivate the certificate in the IFS-portal within two days. The portal will inform your customers about this event automatically.

The producer must bear the full costs of a non-conducted unannounced assessment, and additional assessments can only be conducted if they are announced. This constitutes a significant disadvantage for you, if your customers consider unannounced assessments a selection criterion.



What is the expected time frame of the assessment?

The standard setter has specified a time frame of sixteen weeks before and two weeks after the due date. That is the last day of the first certification according to IFS Food. IFS offers an Excel tool for the determination of these time frames on its homepage.

What happens if I'm not available, sick or on vacation?

It's always possible that key people may not be available in the defined time frame, due to vacation, etc. Therefore, the IFS allows companies to specify 10 days on which no assessment shall take place (non-production periods should also be specified). These ten days can be spread across a maximum of three time windows and must be announced to the certifying body together with the non-production periods.

Please announce those ten days to the certifying body in writing before the start of the time frame of the unannounced assessment.

We are a seasonal business. May we also use the ten blocked days?

Seasonal businesses may not use the ten-day time window, in which no assessment shall take place.

Our business has non-production periods. How shall we deal with those?

Non-production periods must be announced to the certifying body before the announcement of a ten-day time window. Therefore, the non-production period will not be deducted from your 10-day blocking contingent. During non-production days, on which there is verifiable proof of production cessation, e.g., due to company vacation or renovations, there will be no unannounced assessment. If such time periods have been announced, the auditor is obligated to check the veracity of and reasons for such non-production periods during the assessment.



What happens if certain products are not produced on this day?

During the assessment, it must be possible to evaluate the products/product groups detailed on the certificate during production. This makes it necessary for such products to be in production at the time of assessment. Products that are produced or packaged by the same machines and are subject to the same risks, may also be assessed. If it is not possible to audit certain products during the production assessment, a supplementary assessment at additional cost will need to be conducted. This assessment may be an announced assessment. Alternatively, non-audited products can be incorporated into the next unannounced supervisory assessment.

What is the 1 out of 3 principle?

The 1 out of 3 principle states that one out of three consecutive audits must be unannounced. This is based on IFS-requirements.

How can we prepare?

Make sure that, apart from production, there are also contact persons for formal criteria on site. They should be familiar with the company's processes, be able to find documents quickly and explain them as well.

Ensure that your filing system for procedures, processes and records is comprehensible. If possible, include other departments in the document structure (structure, communication and filing). Prepare documents that are accessible to the auditor at any time.

In case of electronic archiving of receipts and documents, make sure that access and passwords also work for topics that are administered through external means in the cloud, such as pest control.

Do we get a schedule of the assessment?

At the beginning of the first day of assessment, the auditor will give you a rough schedule. However, you will not be given an audit schedule ahead of time. The assessment sequence is as follows:

1. Short introduction,
2. Production,
3. Production-related processes,
4. Other IFS-topics.

How will our customers know that we have undergone an unannounced audit?

The certificate and report will specify that the audit was conducted unannounced. It will also be entered as such into the IFS database.

What is the audit process for headquarters?

 A headquarters must always be audited first. The audit can be announced or unannounced. If the headquarters is located at a production site, there will be two assessments – one at the headquarters and, immediately following that, one at the production site. If the production site is not at the same location as the headquarters, it will be audited no sooner than two days after the headquarters.

So far, we have been using TÜV NORD CERT's combined audits and combined our IFS food assessment with audits following other standards. How does it work in case of an unannounced assessment?

We also offer our proven combined audits for unannounced assessments, so that you can save costs and effort.

To avail yourself of this option, you must authorize the certifying body to audit the secondary standards completely unannounced as well.

That is the only way to keep the time reduction. If you don't want that, a new audit must be conducted for the secondary standard with the full time scope of the respective assessment.

Do we need a new contract or a contract supplement for the contract with TÜV NORD CERT?

The registration and additional information, e.g., for contact persons and the ten blocked days, must be stipulated in the contract and entered into the database of the certifying body. If you send us the form for the blocked time periods, we will take care of everything else.

Additional Information

The IFS provides additional information regarding unannounced assessments on its internet portal:

<https://www.ifs-certification.com/index.php/en/standards/4128-ifs-food-standard-en>



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