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# Meal Periods

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Dear Reader:

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We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with county government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other CTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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## Meal Periods

Reference Number: CTAS-988

Meal time when the employee is completely relieved from duty is not work time. For an employee's meal periods to be excluded from compensable working time:

1. The meal period generally must be at least 30 minutes; and
2. The employee must be completely relieved of all duties (if the employee must sit at a desk and incidentally answer the telephone, for example, this would be compensable time); and
3. The employee must be free to leave his or her duty post. However, there is no requirement that the employee be allowed to leave the premises or work site.

All voluntary work done during meal periods must be counted as compensable working time if the employer knows or has reason to believe work is being performed. Meal time spent out of town on business trips is generally not compensable time. Of course, if an employee works during the meal, such time is compensable.

A special meal time rule applies to law enforcement personnel using the special § 7(k) exemption. Under these circumstances, the county may exclude meal time from hours worked on tours of duty of 24 hours or less, provided that the employee is completely relieved from duty during the meal period, and all the other tests are met. On the other hand, where law enforcement personnel are required to remain on call in barracks or similar quarters, or are engaged in extended surveillance activities (e.g., "stakeouts"), they are not considered to be completely relieved from duty, and any such meal periods would be compensable.

With respect to firefighters employed under the § 7(k) exemption, who are confined to a duty station, meal time cannot be excluded from the compensable hours of work where (1) the firefighter is on a tour of duty of less than 24 hours, or (2) the firefighter is on a tour of duty of exactly 24 hours. In the case of police officers or firefighters who are on a tour of duty of more than 24 hours, meal time may be excluded from compensable hours of work provided that the regular tests are met and the employer and employees agree.

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**Source URL:** <https://www.ctas.tennessee.edu/eli/meal-periods>