

Catering from home safely



FOOD
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Introduction

Are you planning to cater from home for family or friends, perhaps for a wedding or birthday, or for a group meeting? If so, then you might find this leaflet helpful.

You might be planning to prepare the food at home and then take it somewhere else to be eaten, such as a community centre, social club or village hall.

As the person preparing or handling the food, it is your responsibility to make sure your food does not make the guests ill. Food poisoning is a miserable and potentially dangerous experience.

You will need to take extra care if any young children, pregnant women, older people or anyone who is ill will be coming to the function. This is because if anyone in these vulnerable groups gets food poisoning, they are more likely to become seriously ill.

If you are handling or preparing food at home as a commercial business, then you must follow the Food Safety (General Food Hygiene) Regulations 1995. Contact your local environmental health department if you want information and advice on these Regulations. For copies of the Food Standards Agency leaflets *Guide to food hygiene* and *Food safety regulations*, contact Food Standards Agency Publications (see back cover).



Keeping food safe

A very wide range of foods can cause food poisoning if not handled properly. Raw poultry, and occasionally raw eggs, may contain food poisoning bacteria. Both are associated with food poisoning outbreaks. Meat and meat products, and shellfish have also been identified as the cause of illness. Sauces and desserts that contain raw eggs, such as mousses and home-made ice creams, may cause problems too. Likewise, you need to be careful with raw salads and vegetables that will be eaten raw. Many foods can be a source of food poisoning bacteria – proper precautions must be taken in preparing them.

The most common errors

Some of the most common errors that may lead to food poisoning are:

- poor storage
- cold foods not kept cold enough or hot foods hot enough
- inadequate cooking
- not separating raw and ready-to-eat food

These are explained on the next few pages.

Storage

- Large functions mean large quantities of cooked and uncooked food competing for limited amounts of fridge and freezer space.
- Inappropriate storage is one of the most common faults reported as contributing to food poisoning outbreaks. Food is often left unrefrigerated for prolonged periods. Domestic fridges are not designed to cope with the large amounts of food prepared in the home for functions.
- Don't take chances. Before you take on the task of catering for large numbers from home, make sure you've got the fridge and freezer capacity needed to keep food cool and safe.
- Check food labels for storage instructions.
- In case there are any drips from raw meat, poultry or fish, keep these items at the bottom of the fridge, below where any ready-to-eat food is stored, and in a leak-proof container. Protect the salad tray from any drips too.
- Keep raw and ready-to-eat food separate.
- Don't clutter up the fridge with wines, beers and soft drinks. While these drinks may taste better cold, they don't need to be refrigerated from the point of view of food safety. Keep them in separate ice buckets, cool bags or cold water so that you can maximise available fridge space for perishable items.



Temperature control

It is, of course, important to keep perishable food in the fridge, particularly in the summer, as most bacteria grow quickly at temperatures above 5°C.

Remember:

- The coldest part of your fridge should be kept between 0°C and 5°C (32-41°F). Use a fridge thermometer to check the temperature regularly.
- Don't overload your fridge. The efficiency of the fridge will suffer if the cooling air circulating within it cannot flow freely.
- Keep the fridge door closed as much as possible. Leaving the door open raises the temperature.
- Prepare food that needs to be kept in the fridge last. Don't leave it standing around at room temperature. Leaving ready-to-eat food at room temperature for a long time can allow harmful bacteria to grow.
- Cooked foods that need to be chilled should be cooled as quickly as possible, preferably within an hour. Avoid putting them in the fridge until they are cool, because this will push up the temperature of the fridge. To cool hot food quickly, place it in the coolest place you can find – often not in the kitchen. Another way is to put the food in a clean, sealable container, and put it under a running cold water tap or in a basin of cold water, or use ice packs in cool bags. Where practical, reduce cooling times by dividing foods into smaller amounts.

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- Once the food is prepared, getting it to where the function is being held can be a problem. This can be particularly difficult when there are large quantities of perishable food involved. Use cool boxes. You will also need to check that the facilities at the place where the function is being held are adequate for keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Adequate fridge and cooker capacity there is just as important as in the home.

Cooking

- Cooking food thoroughly is the key to killing most of the harmful bacteria that cause food poisoning. Large meat joints or whole poultry are more difficult to prepare safely, so take special care with them.
- Make sure meat and poultry are fully thawed before cooking or expected cooking times might not be long enough. You can thaw food in the fridge, by microwaving or at room temperature.
- Use any cooking instructions on packaging as a guide, but always check that the centre of the food is piping hot.
- Domestic ovens may not have the capacity to handle the amounts of food needed to be cooked for functions, particularly if large joints of meat and whole poultry are involved.
- Make sure cooked food is not reheated more than once. Always heat until piping hot all the way through.



- Don't be tempted to cut cooking time just because people are waiting to eat. This is particularly important when microwaving or barbecuing.
- Take proper care with leftovers. Throw away any perishable food that has been standing at room temperature for more than a couple of hours, and throw away all food scraps. Store other leftovers in clean, covered containers in the fridge and eat within 48 hours.

Preparing food

It is important to separate raw and ready-to-eat food at all times. If raw food is allowed to touch or drip onto ready-to-eat food, harmful bacteria can be transferred onto the ready-to-eat food. When preparing food, bacteria can also be spread from hands, cloths, knives and chopping boards, so make sure these are all cleaned thoroughly after contact with raw food. The transfer of bacteria from one food to another is called cross-contamination and is a major cause of food poisoning.

Cooking for large numbers can mean more people in the kitchen at the same time. There are likely to be greater quantities of food, raw and cooked. More pots, pans, plates and utensils will be used.

There will be more washing up and greater problems keeping worktops clean. Here are some basic rules that will help you to keep food safe:

- Prepare raw and ready-to-eat food separately. Don't use the same knife or chopping board for raw meat, ready-to-eat food and raw fruit or vegetables unless they are cleaned thoroughly between uses.
- Wash dishes, worktops and cutlery with hot water and detergent.
- Wash hands regularly with warm water and soap to keep them clean. Always wash them before touching food, after using the toilet, after touching pets or the dustbin, and when they look dirty. Hands should also be washed frequently while preparing food, especially between handling raw and ready-to-eat foods.
- Keep dish cloths clean and change them frequently. Also change tea towels and hand towels often. You might find paper towels a more practical option.
- If you have any cuts or grazes on exposed areas, make sure these are kept covered with a waterproof dressing. Don't wipe your hands on the tea towel, use a separate kitchen towel.
- Keep out of the kitchen anyone who is ill, or has recently been ill, with diarrhoea or vomiting, even if they're not handling food.



Vulnerable groups

Take extra special care if babies, toddlers, pregnant women, older people and anyone who is ill are attending the function, as food poisoning bacteria can make them very ill.

These groups should avoid raw (unpasteurised) milk. This milk has not been heat-treated and may, therefore, contain organisms harmful to health.

Make sure there are alternatives to pâté and soft ripened cheeses – such as brie, camembert and blue-vein types – because these may contain listeria, which can cause illness for pregnant women, babies, older people and anyone with low resistance to infection. For these groups, the illness is often severe and can be life threatening.

Big functions, big responsibilities

Catering from home for large functions means that you might be preparing food for more people than usual, cooking foods you don't cook very often, and storing large amounts of food. All of these have safety implications.

You might find it helpful to think about these issues:

- Large functions mean large quantities of food. You must make sure there is enough fridge and freezer space to cope. Is your domestic oven large enough for the job you're asking it to do?
- How will you cope with the extra people in the kitchen, the extra clutter, more dirty dishes, plates, utensils and messier worktops? You will need to ensure that your helpers also understand the need for good hygiene practice.
- Can you get the food to the function room safely? And when you've got it there, will you have the necessary facilities for safe refrigerated storage and proper reheating?

Remember – food poisoning is a miserable and potentially dangerous experience. You are responsible for ensuring the safety of the guests if you are preparing food for them.



Checklist

Catering from home for large functions is not something to be taken on lightly.

Large amounts of food need to be prepared in advance and stored appropriately. If this is not done properly the risk of food poisoning is increased. You need to plan ahead and think carefully about food safety. If you're thinking of catering for larger numbers than usual, here are some key DOs and DON'Ts.

Plan carefully

- DON'T make food too far in advance.
- DON'T leave food standing around for several hours in a warm room before it is eaten.
- DO make sure you've got enough fridge and freezer space. Get the help of friends and neighbours to make sure you have the capacity you need.
- DO take special care with vulnerable groups.

Proper temperature control is essential

- DO make sure that perishable food is kept chilled. Perishable food includes, for example, cold meats, quiches and desserts. Keep the most perishable foods in the coldest part of the fridge; but always store raw food below ready-to-eat food, in case there are any drips, and keep it in a leak-proof container.

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- DO make sure that food is cooked thoroughly. Large meat joints and whole poultry need special care to make sure the centre is well cooked. If you're reheating food, DON'T do it more than once – and always heat it until piping hot all the way through.
 - DO keep hot food hot and cold food cold.

Avoid contaminating prepared food

- DON'T let raw foods, such as meat and poultry, or unwashed fruit, vegetables and salads, come into contact with food that is ready to eat.
- DO wash your hands thoroughly before touching foods and after handling raw foods such as meat and poultry.

Take care with eggs

- DON'T use raw eggs in uncooked or lightly cooked foods such as home-made mayonnaise, mousse, cake icing and hollandaise sauce. Use pasteurised egg instead.

If you're thinking of catering for a large function from your own home, the best advice is:

Make sure you can do it safely.

The **Food Standards Agency** is a UK-wide, independent Government agency, providing advice and information to the public and Government on food safety, nutrition and diet.

The Agency was created to protect the interests of consumers and its guiding principles are to:

- put the consumer first
- be open and accessible
- be an independent voice

The Agency's advice is based on the best scientific evidence available from independent expert advisory committees, and all its advice is made public.

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