



Catering from home...

...do it safely



Are you planning to cater from home for family or friends - perhaps for a wedding or birthday, or for a group meeting?

Are you planning to prepare the food at home and transport it elsewhere to be eaten - a community centre, social club or village hall?

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

You will need to take extra care if young children, pregnant women, older people or anyone who is ill is at the function. 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 you must follow the Food Hygiene (England) Regulations 2006. Contact Environmental Health for information and advice on these regulations.

Keeping food safe

A 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 - including mousses and homemade ice creams - may cause problems too. You also need to be careful with salads and vegetables that will be eaten raw. It is vital that proper precautions are taken during preparation.

Common errors

The most common errors that lead to food poisoning are:

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

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 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. So don't take chances:

- make sure you've got the fridge and freezer capacity needed to keep food cool and safe
- check food labels for storage instructions
- keep raw meat, poultry or fish at the bottom of the fridge, below ready to eat food and in leak proof containers. Protect the salad tray from any drips
- keep raw and ready to eat food separate
- Don't clutter up the fridge with wines, beers and soft drinks - they may taste better cold but they don't need to be refrigerated for food safety purposes. Instead keep them in separate ice buckets, cool bags or cold water so maximising fridge space for perishable items
- keep the most perishable foods in the coldest part of the fridge - cold meats, quiches and desserts.

Temperature controls

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

And remember...

- The coldest part of the fridge should be kept between 0°C and 5°C—use a fridge thermometer to check the temperature regularly.
- Don't overload your fridge - its efficiency 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 and 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, as this will push up the fridge temperature. To cool hot food quickly, place it in the coolest place you can find - often not in the kitchen. Or place the food in a clean, sealable container and put it under a running cold water tap; in a basin of cold water; or in ice packed cool bags. Cooling times can be reduced by dividing foods into smaller amounts.
- Once the food is prepared, getting it to the function can be an issue

particularly when there are large quantities of perishable food. Use cool boxes and check that the venue has adequate facilities to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Adequate fridge and cooker capacity at the venue is 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.
- Make sure cooked food is not reheated more than once and always heat until piping hot all the way through.
- Domestic ovens may not have the capacity to handle the amounts of food needed for functions, particularly if large joints of meat and whole poultry are involved.
- Don't be tempted to cut cooking time because people are waiting to eat - especially when microwaving or barbecuing.
- Take care with leftovers - throw away any perishable food that has been standing at room temperature for more than two 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 always separate raw and ready to eat food. If raw food is allowed to touch or drip onto ready to eat food, harmful bacteria can be transferred on to it. When preparing food, bacteria can also be spread from hands, cloths, knives and chopping boards. Make sure they are all cleaned thoroughly after contact with raw food. The transfer of bacteria from one food to another - cross contamination - 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 and more pots, pans, plates and utensils will be used. There will be more washing up and greater problems keeping worktops clean. Follow these basic rules to help 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 and 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 regularly - paper towels may be a more practical option.
- Cover any cuts or grazes on exposed areas with a waterproof dressing.
- Don't wipe your hands on the tea towel, use a separate kitchen towel.
- Keep anyone who is ill - or has recently been ill - with diarrhoea or vomiting out of the kitchen, even

if they are not handling food.

Vulnerable groups

Take extra 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. It has not been heat treated and may contain organisms harmful to health.

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

Big functions... ..big responsibilities

Catering from home for large functions means that you are probably 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. Consider the following:

- Large functions mean large quantities of food - is there enough fridge and freezer space to cope? Is your domestic oven large enough for the job you are 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? Make sure your helpers also understand the need for good hygiene practice.
- Can you get the food to the function room safely?
- Does the function venue you have the necessary facilities for safe refrigerated storage and proper reheating?

Remember...

...food poisoning is miserable and potentially dangerous

...you are responsible for ensuring the safety of the guests if you are preparing food for them

...know what is in the ingredients so information about allergens can be provided eg a 'contains nuts' label for cakes

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. Plan ahead and think carefully about food safety. If you're thinking of catering for larger numbers than usual consider these DOs and DON'Ts.

DO plan carefully

DON'T make food too far in advance

DON'T leave food standing around for several hours in a warm room

DO make sure you've got enough fridge and freezer space

DO take special care with vulnerable groups

DO make sure that perishable food is kept chilled

DO make sure that food is cooked thoroughly

DON'T re heat food more than once - and always heat it until piping hot all the way through

DO keep hot food hot and cold food cold

DO avoid contaminating prepared food

DON'T let raw foods come into contact with food that is ready to eat

DO wash your hands thoroughly before touching foods and after handling raw foods

DO take care with eggs

DON'T use raw eggs in uncooked or lightly cooked foods - use pasteurised egg

If you are catering for a large function from your own home...

...make sure you can do it safely



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