

CATERING FOR LARGE NUMBERS



It is becoming all too familiar to hear of guests at private parties being taken ill with food poisoning. Sometimes food prepared in the home has been taken somewhere else to be eaten, such as the village hall, community centre, or social club where the function is being held. What should have been a happy occasion for everyone can turn out to be just the opposite for some.

Food poisoning is a miserable and potentially dangerous experience. It is your responsibility to ensure that your food does not make the guests ill. If it does, you run the risk of spoiling the function and alienating your friends. You also need to take extra care with people coming to the party who are specially vulnerable, for example, young children, pregnant women, the elderly and anyone who is ill.

This information is directed at people handling or preparing food at home for family or friends.

Which foods do I need to take special care over?

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, and are often associated with food poisoning outbreaks. Meat and meat products, and fish and shellfish, have similarly been identified as culprits when illness has struck.

Sauces and desserts like mousses and home-made ice creams, which may contain eggs which have not been cooked, may cause problems too.

Likewise you also need to be careful with raw salads and vegetables which do not undergo any further process before they are eaten. Many foods can be a source of food poisoning bacteria - proper precautions must be taken in preparing them.

What are the most common faults?

Some of the most common faults which may lead to poisoning are:-

- poor storage;
- cold foods not kept cold enough or hot foods hot enough
- inadequate cooking
- cross-contamination;

Lets have a look at these in a little more detail.

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 commonest 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 parties.

Don't take chances. Before you take on a 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. In case there are any drips from raw meat or defrosting food, keep these items at the bottom of the fridge, below where any cooked food is stored. Protect the salad tray from any drips too.

Keep cooked and uncooked food separate.

Don't clutter the fridge up 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 if the weather is mild as bacteria grow quickly at temperatures above 10°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.
- 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 food, which won't be heated again before being eaten, for hours at room temperature can be a recipe for disaster.
- Cooked foods which need to be chilled should be cooled as quickly as possible, but don't put them in the fridge until they are cool as this will just push the temperature of the fridge up.
- To cool hot food quickly, place it in the coolest place you can find - often not 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. Also, make full use of ice packs in cool bags. Where practical, reduce cooling times by limiting size of meat joints or dividing products into smaller amounts.
- Once prepared, getting the food 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.

- Once there, are facilities adequate for keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold? Adequate fridge and cooker capacity at the place where the function is being held is just as important as in the home.

Cooking

- Cooking food thoroughly - which means making sure that the temperature at the centre reaches at least 70°C for at least two minutes - is the key to killing most of the harmful bacteria that cause food poisoning. Large meat joints or whole poultry need special care.
- Make sure meat and poultry are fully thawed before cooking. The best way to thaw food is either in the fridge or by microwaving.
- Make sure that the centre is well cooked. Cook until the juices run clear. Use a meat thermometer if possible.
- 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 times just because people are waiting to eat. This is particularly important when microwaving or barbecuing.
- Take proper care with left-overs. Throw away any perishable food that has been standing at room temperature for more than a couple of hours, and all food scraps.
- Store other left-overs in clean, covered containers in the fridge and eat within 48 hours.

Cross-contamination

Cross-contamination (that is, bacteria spreading from foods yet to be cooked, or from pets, hands, dirty cloths etc on to prepared food) can play an important part in food poisoning outbreaks.

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. Larger numbers of pots, pans, plates and utensils being used. More washing up. Greater problems keeping work tops clean.

There are certain basic rules which will help reduce the scope for cross-contamination:

- Prepare raw and cooked food separately. Don't use the same knife or chopping board for raw meat, cooked food and raw fruit or vegetables unless they are cleaned thoroughly in hot soapy water between uses.
- Wash dishes, worktops and cutlery with hot water and detergent.

- Keep your hands clean at all times. Always wash them in hot soapy water before touching food, after using the toilet, or touching pets, dirty washing or the dustbin. Hands should also be washed frequently whilst preparing food, especially between handling raw and cooked foods.
- Keep dishcloths clean and change tea towels and hand towels frequently.
- Make sure, if you have any cut or grazes on exposed areas, that these are kept covered with a waterproof dressing. Don't wipe your hands on the tea towel. Use a separate kitchen towel.
- Keep anyone who is, or has recently been, ill with diarrhoea or vomiting out of the kitchen, even if they're not handling food.

Vulnerable groups

Take extra care if babies, toddlers, pregnant women, or anyone who is ill are attending the party as food poisoning bacteria can make them very ill.

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

Make sure that are alternatives to pate and soft ripened cheeses like brie, camembert and blue-vein types for pregnant women and anyone with a low resistance to infection.

Big parties mean big responsibilities!

Don't take chances with people's health.

- If you haven't got the facilities to cater safely for functions from home, don't do it. Catering from home for large parties brings with it problems which the domestic cook doesn't generally face.
- Large parties 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 understand the need for good hygiene practice as well as you.
- 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 re-heating?

It is worth re-stating - food poisoning is a miserable and potentially dangerous experience. Always remember that you are responsible for ensuring the safety of the guests for whom you are preparing food.

Checklist:

Catering from home for large parties

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 store appropriately prior to consumption. If 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 than usual numbers, here are some key Do's and Don'ts.

Plan carefully

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

Proper temperature control is essential

- DO make sure that perishable food is kept chilled. This means cold meats, quiches, desserts etc. Keep the most perishable foods in the coldest part of the fridge; but always store cooked food above raw, in case there are any drips.
- 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 re-heating food, DON'T do it more than once. Always heat 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, like 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 handling raw foods like meat and poultry.
- DON'T use raw eggs in uncooked foods, eg chocolate mousse, cake icing and home-made mayonnaise. Use pasteurised egg or commercial mayonnaise.

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

If you can't do it safely, don't do it at all