

# Food safety for caterers

## Food issues with catering

A number of food poisoning outbreaks have been due to catering operations not cooking or storing food properly. Other problems include inadequate handling of food that's been prepared at one site and transported and served elsewhere. Facilities that are ill-equipped or unsuitable for the volume of food being prepared is another common catering problem.

## Some causes of food poisoning

Some common mistakes that can cause food poisoning include:

- Under-cooking that does not kill bacteria in raw foods such as meat and poultry;
- Slow reheating and slow cooking under low heat that provides the ideal temperature (20°C to 50°C) for bacteria to grow.
- Improper cooling that allows food to stay at temperatures that allow bacteria to grow for two or more hours.
- Inadequate transportation and storage temperatures, that can allow the growth of bacteria.
- Cooking foods too far in advance which increases the chance of food becoming contaminated with bacteria and food being stored incorrectly, allowing bacteria to grow.
- Poor personal hygiene from food handlers can lead to contamination of food through dirty hands, coughing, cross contamination etc

## How to prevent food poisoning

### Thaw food completely in the fridge

Thaw frozen foods completely before cooking. This is especially important with large cuts of meat or poultry, which may not cook totally through if not thawed. Frozen food must be fully thawed in the refrigerator or a microwave oven before cooking.

### Cook food properly

Food must be cooked at a high enough temperature to destroy bacteria. The key is to not cook more food than the facility can effectively handle.

Use a calibrated probe thermometer to check that correct cooking temperatures are reached.

The probe should be disinfected before and after use, and all final cooking temperatures recorded.

Food must be cooked to the appropriate internal

temperature. This is particularly important for meat (71°C), poultry (82°C) and seafood (65°C). Once cooked, meat and poultry should be maintained above 60°C or cooled below 5°C as soon as possible.

Partially cooked meat must be re-heated so the core temperature reaches at least 75°C immediately before serving. All other food must be preheated to the temperatures noted above before placing in a hot holding device (eg bain marie).

## Storage and transportation of food

There needs to be adequate hot/cold storage and display unit capacity so food can be stored at the appropriate temperature: under 5°C for cold food, above 60°C for hot food.

Reducing portion size (eg by using shallow dishes instead of large pots) allows food to cool or heat more rapidly.

Food must be maintained at the appropriate storage temperature during delivery to another site. Transport vehicles should be designed and constructed in accordance with NSW legislation.

## Protect food

All food must be adequately protected (ie enclosed or covered) when stored or displayed to prevent contamination by dust, insects or other sources. This is especially important if catering for outdoor events, especially during summer when flies can be a problem. It is important to protect food and utensils from contamination by flies.

## Avoid cross contamination

Handle raw food separately from ready-to-eat food to avoid cross contamination with bacteria. Where possible, use separate equipment and utensils (knives, tongs, cutting boards etc) for raw and ready-to-eat food, or clean and sanitise thoroughly between use. A chemical sanitiser is needed for sanitising utensils. A separate container may be required for rinsing.

## Food safety training and personal hygiene

Food handlers should be adequately trained in food safety and personal hygiene. Basic personal hygiene practices include:

- Thoroughly wash and dry hands before handling food and after:
  - visiting the toilet
  - blowing your nose or coughing

- smoking
- handling raw food or waste
- Wear clean outer clothing when handling food.
- Use clean disposable gloves when handling food.
- Tie back long hair or wear a cap.
- Cover cuts, sores or skin breaks with clean waterproof dressings.
- Do not cough or sneeze over food.

Bare hands should ideally not be used to handle ready-to-eat food. Only do so if hands are clean with no bare wounds or sores. It is better to use tongs, other utensils or disposable gloves. Disposable gloves need to be changed regularly and will only remain clean if they do not touch anything that might be contaminated.

Food handlers must inform employers if they have any skin, nose, throat or bowel infections. If suffering any of these conditions they must not handle food.

For more information see the following Food Authority Fact Sheets and publications:

*Safe Handling – Poultry and Raw Meat*

*Correct Cooking Temperatures*

*Food Handling Guidelines for Temporary Events*