

Food safety for caterers

Handling, cooking and storing food properly is critical to prevent food poisoning outbreaks. Facilities that are ill-equipped or unsuitable for the food being prepared is a common catering problem that often leads to food poisoning.

Causes of food poisoning

The following common catering mistakes can allow the growth of bacteria which causes food poisoning:

- undercooking food such as meat and poultry – bacteria can survive as a result of inadequate cooking
 - slow reheating and slow cooking under low heat – provides the ideal temperature (20°C to 50°C) for bacteria to grow
 - improper cooling – allows food to stay too long (over two hours) at the ideal temperature for bacteria to grow
 - cooking food too far in advance –increases the chance of food becoming contaminated with bacteria
 - not storing food properly and using incorrect temperatures for transportation and storage of food – allows the growth of bacteria
 - poor personal hygiene from food handlers – can lead to contamination of food through dirty hands, coughing, and cross contamination.
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Prevent food poisoning

All of the elements involved in running a catering operation must be correctly managed to avoid causing food poisoning.

Use adequate catering facilities

Food preparation areas as well as all cooking and refrigeration facilities must be suitable for the volume of food being prepared.

Catering premises should adhere to the standards for flooring in food preparation and storage areas, have adequate hand washing and refrigeration facilities, and must be designed to exclude pests and vermin.

Store and transport food safely

Another common cause of food poisoning is inadequate handling and storage of food that's been prepared at one site and transported and served elsewhere.

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.

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

All food must be adequately protected (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.

Cook food properly

Food poisoning outbreaks can occur when food is not cooked properly.

Thaw frozen foods completely before cooking, especially large cuts of meat or poultry which may not cook right through if they haven't been fully thawed. Frozen food should only be thawed in a refrigerator or a microwave oven before cooking, and not left on the bench to thaw.

Food must be cooked to the appropriate internal core temperature to destroy bacteria and make it safe. This is extremely important for meat (71°C), poultry (74°C) and seafood (63°C). Different meats require different cooking temperatures to destroy harmful bacteria, for example a steak can be just seared on the outside and rare inside, whilst minced meat must be carefully cooked to destroy bacteria. This is because minced meat has a greater surface area than steak and the inside has been exposed to the atmosphere and, therefore, at a greater risk of bacterial contamination. Cook minced meat, sausages and poultry right through to the centre. No pink should be visible and juices should run clear.

Once cooked, food should be held at a temperature above 60°C or cooled to below 5°C as quickly as possible.

Partially cooked meat must – for the final cooking stage – reach its appropriate internal core temperature before being served.

Other cooked food must be reheated to these temperatures before being placed in a hot holding device (such as a bain marie).

Caterers should 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.

The key is to cook food in small enough batches to allow it all to reach a high enough temperature. Also, reducing portion size by using shallow dishes instead of large pots allows food to cool or heat more rapidly and thoroughly.

Avoid cross-contamination

Caterers should handle raw food separately from ready-to-eat food to avoid cross contamination with bacteria. Where possible, use separate equipment and utensils (such as knives, tongs and cutting boards) for raw and ready-to-eat food, or clean and sanitise thoroughly between each use. Using tongs or disposable gloves can reduce the risk of contamination of ready-to-eat food. Disposable gloves will only be effective if they are changed regularly, and always after coming into contact with anything that might be contaminated.

Cleaning and sanitising

Food contact surfaces (such as chopping boards) and eating and drinking utensils must be cleaned and sanitised before use. This can be done by using a chemical (such as sanitiser) or heat (such as a dishwasher).

Train staff in personal hygiene when handling food

Basic personal hygiene practices include:

- thoroughly washing and drying hands before handling food, and after:
 - visiting the toilet
 - blowing your nose, sneezing or coughing
 - smoking
 - handling raw food or waste
 - wearing clean outer clothing when handling food
 - tying back long hair or wearing a cap
 - covering cuts, sores or skin breaks with clean waterproof dressings.

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.

More information

- Visit [foodauthority.nsw.gov.au](https://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au)
 - [Factsheet: Cleaning and sanitising](#) (PDF, 407KB)
 - [Factsheet: Health and hygiene requirements of food handlers](#) (PDF, 151KB)
 - [Factsheet: Potentially hazardous foods](#) (PDF, 352 KB)
 - [Poultry and red meat – safe handling](#)
 - [Temporary food events and markets](#)
 - [Guideline: Food safety guidelines for the preparation and display of sushi](#) (PDF, 523KB)
 - [Guidelines for food service to vulnerable persons](#) (PDF, 503KB).
- Email the Food Authority helpline at food.contact@dpi.nsw.gov.au
- Phone the Food Authority helpline on 1300 552 406

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