

Food safety for caterers

Food poisoning outbreaks can occur when caterers don't handle, cook or store food properly. 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 of raw foods 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 incorrect temperatures for transportation and storage—allows the growth of bacteria
- poor personal hygiene from food handlers—can lead to contamination of food through dirty hands, coughing, cross contamination etc

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 handwashing 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 particularly important for meat (71°C), poultry (74°C) and seafood (63°C). 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 (eg 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

(knives, tongs, cutting boards etc) for raw and ready-to-eat food, or clean and sanitise thoroughly between each use. A chemical sanitiser is needed for sanitising utensils. A separate container may be required for rinsing.

Train staff in food safety and personal hygiene

Food handlers must be adequately trained in food safety and personal hygiene.

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
- using clean disposable gloves when handling food
- tying back long hair or wearing a cap
- covering cuts, sores or skin breaks with clean waterproof dressings

Even though it is not a legal requirement to wear gloves, the Authority does not recommend using bare hands to handle ready-to-eat food. 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.

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.

Some of this information will change if the food handler training legislation currently before parliament is passed.

About the NSW Food Authority

The NSW Food Authority is the government organisation that helps ensure NSW food is safe and correctly labelled.

It works with consumers, industry and other government organisations to minimise food poisoning by providing information about and regulating the safe production, storage, transport, promotion and preparation of food.

More information

- visit the NSW Food Authority's website at www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/industry
- phone the helpline on 1300 552 406

The following factsheets and publications on the website may also help:

- Health and hygiene requirements of food handlers
- Potentially hazardous foods
- Poultry and red meat – safe handling
- Temporary food events and markets
- Food safety guidelines for the preparation and display of sushi
- There are special requirements for businesses serving food to vulnerable persons. Refer to the website at www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/industry/industry-sector-requirements/food-service-to-vulnerable-populations/

Note

This information is a general summary and cannot cover all situations. Food businesses are required to comply with all of the provisions of the Food Standards Code and the *Food Act 2003* (NSW).