Food safety for community cooking and food banks

Hygiene and allergy advice for individuals and groups preparing meals to share in their community.

This guidance provides food safety information and guidance for individuals or groups wishing to prepare meals at home for their community. This can include preparing or donating meals for:

- those in self-isolation due to coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms
- vulnerable groups who are being shielded
- community groups and local organisations
- NHS staff.

Food provided for community groups must comply with food law and be safe to eat.

You do not need a food hygiene certificate to provide food for charity or community groups. However, you need to make sure that you handle food safely.

Registration

If you handle, prepare, store and serve food occasionally and on a small scale, you do not need to register as a food business.

If you are providing food on a regular and organised basis, or are setting up a food bank, you may need to register with your local authority.

Existing food banks should already be registered with their local authority and have actions in place to minimise the risks to users.

Your local authority will make a decision on whether you need to register.

Food hygiene when cooking for your community or donating food

If you are donating or preparing food, it is important to make sure that those who receive the food know what is in it and how to prepare it. This is so it doesn't present a risk of making them ill.

Donating prepacked food products will make sure that the foods are properly labelled with instructions such as use-by dates, allergen information and storage guidelines.

If you are preparing meals, the four main things to remember for good hygiene are the 4Cs: cleaning, cooking, chilling and avoiding cross-contamination.

It's very important to store food properly to keep it safe. Storing food in sealed containers and at the correct temperature protects it from harmful bacteria, stops objects falling into it, and avoids cross-contamination with other ingredients.

Here are some practical tips for when you're making food for large numbers of people:

- wash your hands regularly with soap and water

- always wash fresh fruit and vegetables before cooking or consumption
- keep raw and ready-to-eat foods separate
- do not use food past its use-by date
- always follow cooking instructions
- make sure food is properly cooked before you serve it
- ensure that food preparation areas are suitably cleaned and sanitised after use, and wash any equipment you are using in hot soapy water
- ensure frozen food is safely defrosted in a fridge before you use it
- keep food out of the fridge for the shortest time possible.

Food temperature

Food that needs to be chilled, such as sandwiches should be left out of the fridge for the minimum possible time, and never for more than four hours.

After this time, any remaining food should be thrown away or put back in the fridge. If you put the food back in the fridge, don't let it stand around at room temperature when you serve it again. It should be eaten as soon as possible.

Allergen guidance when cooking for your community or donating food

If you do not need to be registered as a food business, you are not required to provide information about allergens present in the food you prepare. However, we recommend that you provide details of the relevant 14 allergens as best practice. This will allow people with food allergies to make safe food choices.

As best practice, anyone making or donating foods for a food bank should label it appropriately, saying what the item is, the date it was produced, and include details of any allergens so that individuals with food hypersensitivities can avoid it.

If you know the people that you are cooking for, ask about any allergy requirements they may have before preparing their meals.

If you are cooking for a community group, you can provide allergen information by labelling food containers or providing a note for each meal.

Cooking for someone with a food allergy or intolerance can be worrying if you’re not used to doing it. You can plan a safe meal by:

- asking what they can and can’t eat
- making sure you keep allergens separate from other foods to avoid cross-contamination
- double-checking the ingredients lists on prepacked foods for allergen information
- checking the ingredients with the person who provided the food, if it was donated
- avoiding adding toppings or garnishes to dishes which might otherwise appear allergen-free
- cleaning work surfaces and equipment thoroughly to remove traces of anything you might have cooked before.

There are often good substitutes available for ingredients that someone may need to avoid. Don’t hesitate to ask for help and suggestions for ingredients from those with a food allergy that you are cooking for.

Food that needs extra care

Some foods are more likely to cause food poisoning than others. These include:

- raw milk
- raw shellfish
- soft cheeses
- pâté
- foods containing raw egg
- cooked sliced meats.

If you plan to serve any of these foods, consult the Foods which need extra care section in our Safer food, better business guidance.

Meal containers

If you wish to provide food in containers, it is important to select appropriate food grade packaging. This is packaging intended for multiple uses, such as Tupperware or takeaway boxes. This will make sure that the transported food is safe and its quality is maintained. For example, packaging materials may be required to be liquid repellent to prevent leaks, or to stop paper becoming soaked through. Without this type of packaging, chemical contaminants or germs could transfer onto the food. Well-fitting lids will also minimise any hygiene or spillage risks.

It is safe to re-use glass and plastic containers, as long as they are free from chips and cracks. Make sure containers are thoroughly cleaned to prevent cross-contamination with germs, allergens and physical contaminants. If they are dishwasher safe, a dishwasher is preferable for cleaning due to the high temperature it reaches. Containers should be washed thoroughly in hot, soapy water if a dishwasher is unavailable.

Delivering meals

All food must be delivered in a way that ensures that it does not become unsafe or unfit to eat.

Food that needs refrigerating must be kept cool while being transported. This may need to be packed in an insulated box with a coolant gel or in a cool bag. Equally, food that needs to be kept hot should be packed in an insulated bag.

You should also avoid possible cross-contamination risks in the delivery process. This can be done through packaging meals securely and storing allergen-free meals separately in transit, to avoid contamination through any spillages.

If an allergen-free meal has been requested, it should be clear when delivered which container it is in. You can use stickers or a note on the container to label each meal.