

CATERING FOR LARGE NUMBERS



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.

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Checklist:

Catering from home for large parties

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