

Food Safety at Parties

A party is great fun. Whether it's to celebrate a birthday, anniversary, wedding, Christmas or community event, it's a time when we gather together the people we care about to celebrate. The last thing we want is for it to end with our guests getting sick with food poisoning. Unfortunately, this is too often what happens.

Why does food poisoning occur more often at large gatherings?

The average home kitchen is really not designed for cooking for large numbers of people. Work surfaces stoves and fridges are intended to cater for normal cooking needs of a family not for preparing large amounts of food.

Guests often bring a plate, which means the food can be out of the fridge for several hours, enough time for any bacteria in it to multiply.

To avoid a last minute rush and being too exhausted to enjoy the party, most people start preparing food well ahead of the event. That's fine, and some, non-perishable items, such as a Christmas cake can be prepared weeks ahead (because the food is too dry for bacteria to grow). Other foods, such as casseroles or sausage rolls, can be cooked in advance but need to be carefully prepared and then chilled or frozen quickly.

Don't be a goose... avoid temperature abuse

Temperature abuse is the major cause of food-borne illness at parties and functions. Remember to minimise the time food stays in the temperature danger zone (5°C - 60°C) by:

- Keeping hot food steaming hot – Use the top of the stove or an oven turned down to just below 100°C.
- If you want to serve food at less than 60°C, that's ok provided that it doesn't stay at that temperature for more than four hours.
- Keeping cold food cold. If you prepare ahead of time, make sure that the fridge is still operating at or below 5°C – even after you've loaded in all that extra food.
- Cooling quickly – Once the steam stops rising, cover the food and put it immediately in the fridge. You want it to cool as quickly as possible so that spores, which can survive cooking, don't germinate.
- Hastening the cooling process of any hot food by pre-cooling it in its container in a sink of iced or cold water or putting it into shallow containers. Chill or freeze the food in those shallow containers. Deep containers can take days for the centre of the food to reach 5°C.

- Thaw any frozen food correctly in the fridge or microwave either the day before or on the day of the party.
- Reheat food fast either on top of the stove, in the oven or in a microwave.

The Fridge

Domestic fridges are not very large and an overcrowded fridge or freezer does not allow the cold air to circulate freely around the food causing food to be inadequately frozen or chilled. When a fridge is overloaded, it has to work overtime to keep food cool and if the weather is hot, the temperature inside will rise.

You should have a fridge thermometer inside the fridge to check that it is operating at the correct temperature (around 4-5°C). At these temperatures food poisoning bacteria will multiply very slowly and the food will remain safe for two or three days. Check your fridge temperatures first thing in the morning after the food has had a chance to cool and adjust the controls to lower the temperature if necessary.

Loading the fridge

Make sure that raw meat and poultry can't contaminate ready to eat food. Raw food can contain food poisoning bacteria. This is not a problem if the food is cooked before it is eaten. However, if these bacteria get onto ready to eat food, such as salads, they can cause food poisoning – see the cross contamination leaflet for more information.

You inevitably will run out of space to allow you to do this properly, particularly if your guests are also bringing food which needs to be refrigerated until you are ready to eat, so what should you do?

What can be taken out of the fridge?

- Take out the drinks. Drinks can't make you sick if they are inadequately cooled, the food can. You can fill the laundry sink and insulated containers or buckets with ice to keep all the drinks chilled.
- Whole fruit can survive in the fruit bowl or cupboard, as can whole raw vegetables. Ground coffee can also be removed for a while without losing its flavour.
- Jars of pickles, chutneys and bottled sauces that have vinegar on the label can be removed they won't be a problem outside the fridge for a couple of days.
- If you still don't have enough room, make sure the things that are to be eaten later are in the fridge and leave out the things you will eat first – remember they can stay out of the fridge for up to four hours in total.

What can't?

- Cooked meats, deli meats, pates, dips etc. These should be left in the fridge until you are ready to eat them.
- Salads – especially cooked vegetable, pasta or rice salads (whether they contain meat or poultry or not).
- Ready to eat seafood.

Preparing and cooking the food

Because of the risks inherent in catering for a large group, you need to be even more careful than usual about preparing the food to prevent any bacteria being introduced by cross contamination.

- Wash your hands, chopping boards, knives and anything else which will come into contact with the food before you start preparation and between preparing raw and ready to eat foods.
- Cook poultry, minced meats, sausages and other pre-prepared meats until well done, right through to the centre. No pink should be left visible. Steaks and other solid pieces of meat can be cooked to taste.
- Do not allow to cool on the bench. As soon as steam stops rising, refrigerate or freeze in a leak-proof container.
- Don't prepare food if you're feeling unwell or have gastroenteritis.
- Keep salads, pates, cheese, dips and other perishable products in the fridge or cooler until needed. It's a good idea to divide nibbles into smaller serves and replace them during the day to reduce the amount of bacteria that can grow. Don't mix fresh top-ups with food that have been outside for some time. Low risk foods, e.g. nuts, crisps, crackers, etc. can be topped up.

Bringing a plate or taking home leftovers

- Use insulated containers with lots of ice-bricks, gel packs etc to keep the food chilled.
- Chill the food well before taking it out of the fridge to pack. Don't pack food if it has just been cooked and is still warm.
- Cover all ready to eat food securely.
- Put meat into a cooler when travelling. Meat juices can easily leak onto pre-prepared foods, so package with this in mind. Place the meat on the bottom of the cooler away from ready-to-eat food
- If you want to bring home any left-overs, ask your hosts to put your ice-bricks or gel packs into the freezer during the party so that you can transport the left-overs home safely. Put leftovers into the fridge as soon as you get home.

And for safety's sake remember the 7 key tips

- Keep hot food steaming hot.
- Keep cold food refrigerated.
- Cook food properly.
- Separate raw and cooked foods.
- Keep kitchen and utensils clean.
- Wash hands with soap and dry thoroughly.
- Never prepare food if you are feeling unwell or have gastroenteritis.

Need more information?

For more information, please go to www.health.act.gov.au or phone the Health Protection Service during business hours on (02) 6205 1700.

Acknowledgement

This information is extracted from Food Safety Information Council – website: www.foodsafety.asn.au



This information sheet was last updated in February 2014

HPS-00-0660

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Enquiries: Canberra 13ACT1 or 132281