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FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Food Temperature Control in Care Catering

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 071

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Introduction

Understanding Food Temperature Control

Controlling food temperature is one of the most important ways of reducing the risk of foodborne illness. Harmful bacteria can multiply when food that requires temperature control is stored, prepared or held under unsuitable conditions.

This is particularly important in **care homes, nursing homes and other care settings**, where meals may be prepared for older adults or people whose health makes them more vulnerable to the effects of foodborne illness.

Effective temperature control should therefore form an essential part of everyday food safety procedures.

Why Temperature Control Matters

Some foods provide ideal conditions for bacteria to grow if they are not handled and stored correctly. These are often referred to as **high-risk or ready-to-eat foods** and can include:

- Cooked meat and poultry
- Cooked fish and seafood
- Dairy products
- Cooked rice and pasta
- Prepared meals and sauces
- Foods containing eggs
- Sandwiches and prepared salads
- Desserts containing cream or dairy products

Keeping these foods at appropriate temperatures helps prevent harmful bacteria from multiplying to unsafe levels.

The Temperature Danger Zone

Bacteria generally multiply most readily at temperatures between approximately:

8°C and 63°C

This range is commonly referred to as the **temperature danger zone**.

Food that requires temperature control should therefore spend as little time as reasonably possible within this temperature range.

As a general principle:

Cold food should be kept cold.
Hot food should be kept hot.

Food businesses must also follow their own documented food safety management procedures, including any temperature limits and monitoring requirements specified within their **HACCP-based food safety system**.

Chilled Food

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, food that requires refrigeration should generally be kept at:

8°C or below

In practice, refrigerators are commonly set to operate at approximately:

5°C or below

This provides a safety margin and helps ensure chilled food remains within the required temperature range.

Catering staff should:

- Check refrigerator temperatures according to workplace procedures
- Record temperatures where required
- Avoid overloading refrigerators
- Keep refrigerator doors closed whenever possible
- Report temperatures outside the organisation's accepted limits
- Follow the appropriate corrective action if safe temperatures cannot be maintained

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Hot-Held Food

Food being kept hot before service should generally be maintained at:

63°C or above

This is particularly relevant in care catering where meals may be prepared in a central kitchen and held before being served to residents.

If hot food falls below the required temperature, staff should **follow their organisation's food safety procedures** rather than simply reheating, serving or continuing to hold the food without appropriate assessment.

Cooking Food Safely

Cooking food thoroughly helps destroy harmful bacteria.

The precise cooking time and temperature used will depend on the food, equipment and organisation's food safety procedures. Catering staff should always follow their workplace's approved cooking methods and temperature requirements.

Where a probe thermometer is used, the temperature should be checked at an appropriate part of the food and recorded where required.

Key Principle

Never rely solely on appearance to decide whether food has been cooked safely.

Colour and appearance are not always reliable indicators that an appropriate core temperature has been achieved.

Good Practice Reminder

Temperature control is a continuous process. Food safety can be compromised at any stage — from delivery and storage through preparation, cooking, holding, cooling, reheating and service.

Safe Temperature Control in Everyday Care Catering

Food temperature must be controlled throughout the entire food journey. Catering staff should follow their organisation's food safety management system and understand the procedures that apply from the moment food is received until it is served.

Checking Food on Delivery

Temperature control begins when food arrives at the premises.

When receiving chilled or frozen food, staff should check deliveries in accordance with workplace procedures. This may include checking:

- Food is delivered at an appropriate temperature
- Chilled food feels suitably cold
- Frozen food remains properly frozen
- Packaging is intact and undamaged
- Use-by dates are acceptable
- There are no signs that food has thawed and been refrozen
- Delivery temperatures are recorded where required

Food that does not meet the organisation's acceptance criteria should be dealt with according to workplace procedures.

Safe Refrigerated Storage

Once accepted, chilled food should be transferred to appropriate refrigerated storage promptly.

Good practice includes:

- Keeping refrigerators at the required temperature
- Checking and recording temperatures at specified intervals
- Avoiding unnecessary opening of refrigerator doors
- Not placing hot food directly into a refrigerator unless an approved procedure allows it
- Avoiding overloading refrigerators, which can restrict cold-air circulation
- Keeping raw and ready-to-eat foods appropriately separated
- Following stock-rotation procedures
- Reporting refrigerator faults or abnormal temperatures promptly

Remember

A temperature reading outside the normal range should never simply be recorded and ignored.

Staff should follow the organisation's corrective-action procedure.

Cooling Cooked Food Safely

Where cooked food is intended to be chilled for later use, it should be cooled **as quickly as safely practicable** and then transferred to refrigerated storage.

Leaving large quantities of warm food at room temperature for prolonged periods can allow bacteria to multiply.

Depending on workplace procedures, safe cooling methods may include:

- Dividing food into smaller portions
- Using shallow containers where appropriate
- Using specialist rapid-cooling equipment such as a blast chiller
- Following established cooling times and temperature checks
- Protecting food from contamination while it cools

Staff should always follow the organisation's approved cooling procedure.

Reheating Food

Food that is reheated should be reheated thoroughly according to the organisation's food safety procedures.

Staff should:

- Follow the approved reheating method
- Ensure food is heated thoroughly throughout
- Check the core temperature where required
- Record the result according to workplace procedures
- Avoid repeatedly reheating the same food

Important

Reheating should not be used as a way of making food safe after poor storage or inadequate temperature control.

If there is doubt about the safety of food, staff should follow their organisation's food safety procedures and seek guidance from the appropriate person.

Hot Holding and Meal Service

Care catering can present additional challenges because food may need to remain hot while meals are plated, transported to different areas or served to residents.

Hot-held food should generally be maintained at:

63°C or above

Staff should minimise unnecessary delays between cooking and service and follow procedures for checking temperatures during hot holding.

Where heated trolleys or other hot-holding equipment are used, these should be operated according to manufacturer instructions and workplace procedures.

Using a Food Probe Thermometer Safely

Probe thermometers can provide an important check that appropriate food temperatures have been achieved.

When using a probe:

- Ensure it is suitable for the task
- Clean and disinfect the probe appropriately before and after use
- Insert it into an appropriate part of the food
- Allow the reading to stabilise
- Record the temperature where required
- Avoid contaminating ready-to-eat food with a probe previously used on raw food
- Store the thermometer safely after use

Thermometers should also be checked for accuracy according to the organisation's procedures.

Temperature Records

Accurate temperature records can provide evidence that important food safety controls are being monitored.

Records may include:

- Delivery temperatures
- Refrigerator and freezer temperatures
- Cooking temperatures
- Cooling checks
- Reheating temperatures
- Hot-holding temperatures
- Corrective action taken when something goes wrong

Records should be completed **accurately and at the time the check is carried out**.

Good Practice Reminder

Never invent, estimate or complete a temperature record without carrying out the required check. If a temperature is outside the accepted limit, record it accurately and take the required corrective action.

Temperature Problems, Corrective Action & Staff Responsibilities

Effective temperature control is not simply about taking and recording temperatures. Catering staff must also know what to do when a temperature is outside the organisation's accepted limits.

In a care environment, concerns should be acted upon promptly because many people receiving care may be particularly vulnerable to foodborne illness.

When a Temperature Is Outside the Safe Limit

If a temperature check produces an unexpected or unacceptable result, staff should **not ignore it or simply change the recorded figure**.

Appropriate action may include:

- Rechecking the temperature to confirm the reading
- Checking that the thermometer has been used correctly
- Reporting the problem to the appropriate senior member of staff
- Following the organisation's documented corrective-action procedure
- Moving food to suitable alternative storage where this can be done safely
- Assessing whether affected food remains safe to use
- Discarding food where required by the food safety procedure
- Recording both the problem and the action taken

Staff should never guess whether potentially unsafe food is suitable to serve.

Refrigerator or Freezer Problems

A refrigerator or freezer operating outside its normal temperature range should be investigated promptly.

Possible causes may include:

- A door being left open
- Equipment being overloaded
- Poor air circulation
- A damaged door seal
- Incorrect temperature settings
- Equipment failure
- A temporary interruption to the electricity supply

Where equipment failure is suspected, staff should follow workplace procedures and report the problem promptly.

Important

Do not assume that food is safe simply because the refrigerator or freezer has started working again.

The length of time the food has been outside appropriate temperature control and the temperatures reached may need to be considered according to the organisation's food safety procedures.

Avoiding Cross-Contamination During Temperature Checks

Temperature monitoring itself must be carried out hygienically.

A contaminated probe thermometer can transfer harmful microorganisms from one food to another.

Staff should:

- Clean and disinfect probes appropriately between uses
- Take particular care when moving between raw and ready-to-eat foods
- Use designated equipment where workplace procedures require it
- Keep thermometer equipment clean and in good condition
- Follow the organisation's cross-contamination controls

This is especially important when checking foods that will receive **no further cooking before being served**.

Food Temperature and Vulnerable Individuals

People living in care settings may include older adults and individuals with underlying health conditions or weakened immune systems.

For some individuals, foodborne illness can result in more serious complications than it might in a healthy adult.

This makes consistent food safety particularly important within care catering.

Staff should never take shortcuts with:

- Cooking
- Chilling
- Cooling
- Reheating
- Hot holding
- Temperature monitoring
- Cleaning and disinfection
- Prevention of cross-contamination

Staff Responsibilities

Everyone involved in food preparation and service has a responsibility to follow safe working practices.

Catering staff should:

- Follow the organisation's food safety management system
- Complete required temperature checks correctly
- Keep accurate records
- Follow approved cooking, cooling, reheating and hot-holding procedures
- Maintain good personal hygiene
- Prevent cross-contamination
- Report faulty equipment promptly
- Take appropriate corrective action when required
- Ask for guidance whenever they are unsure

Staff should only undertake duties for which they have received appropriate **information, instruction and training**.

The Role of HACCP-Based Food Safety Procedures

Food businesses are required to have appropriate food safety management procedures based on the principles of **Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP)**.

Temperature control may form an important part of these procedures.

For example, an organisation may identify particular stages where temperature needs to be controlled and monitored to help ensure food remains safe.

Staff should therefore understand the temperature-control procedures relevant to their role and know:

What must be checked → When it must be checked → What limits apply → What must be recorded → What action to take if something goes wrong.

Never Falsify Food Safety Records

Temperature records are an important part of demonstrating that food safety controls are being followed.

Staff should never:

- Enter a temperature that was not actually measured
- Alter an unacceptable reading to make it appear acceptable
- Complete records retrospectively from memory unless an authorised procedure specifically addresses a missed record
- Sign for checks carried out by another person
- Ignore an abnormal result because food service is busy

If a required check has been missed, staff should report this honestly and follow workplace procedures.

Good Practice Reminder

Safe food temperature control depends on both monitoring and action. Recording an unsafe temperature without responding to it does not control the risk.

Every member of the catering team has a role in protecting the people who eat the food they prepare and serve.

Summary

Effective food temperature control is essential for reducing the risk of foodborne illness and protecting people who may be particularly vulnerable to infection.

Care catering teams should ensure that food is stored, prepared, cooked, cooled, reheated, held and served in accordance with their organisation's food safety management procedures.

Good temperature control involves more than taking readings. Staff must understand the required limits, keep accurate records and take appropriate corrective action whenever something goes wrong.

Food Temperature Control Checklist

Before preparing or serving food, ask:

☐ Are chilled and frozen foods being stored correctly?

☐ Are refrigerator and freezer temperatures being checked according to workplace procedures?

☐ Are cooking temperatures being checked where required?

☐ Is hot-held food generally being maintained at **63°C or above**?

☐ Is chilled food that requires temperature control generally being kept at **8°C or below**?

☐ Is cooked food being cooled safely and promptly where it is intended for later use?

☐ Is reheated food being heated thoroughly according to workplace procedures?

☐ Are food probe thermometers being cleaned and disinfected appropriately between uses?

☐ Are temperature records being completed accurately at the time checks are performed?

☐ Is corrective action taken and recorded when a temperature is outside the accepted limit?

☐ Are equipment faults and food safety concerns reported promptly?

☐ Are the organisation's HACCP-based food safety procedures being followed?

Remember

If you are unsure whether food is safe, do not guess. Follow your organisation's food safety procedures and seek guidance from the appropriate person.

Further Information

For further guidance on food temperature control and food safety, visit:

Food Standards Agency – Chilling

https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/chilling

Guidance on safely chilling and storing food.

Food Standards Agency – Cooking Your Food

https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/cooking-your-food

Information about cooking food safely and the importance of appropriate time and temperature controls.

Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business

https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/safer-food-better-business-sfbb

Food safety management information and resources for food businesses.

Food Standards Agency – HACCP

https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/hazard-analysis-and-critical-control-point-haccp

Information about food safety management procedures based on HACCP principles.

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

Resource 031 – Managing Allergens in Care Catering

Resource 032 – Preventing Cross-Contamination in Care Catering

These resources complement food temperature control by supporting safer food preparation and service within care catering environments.

Related FlexiLearnHub Courses

Food Safety & Hygiene Level 2

Develop a broader understanding of essential food hygiene principles and safe food handling practices.

HACCP Training

Develop your understanding of food safety hazards, critical controls, monitoring procedures and corrective action within a HACCP-based food safety system.

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