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Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality

FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Safe Food Storage in Care Catering

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 072

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Introduction

Understanding Safe Food Storage

Safe food storage is an essential part of food hygiene. Food that is stored incorrectly can become contaminated, deteriorate in quality or allow harmful bacteria to multiply.

In **care homes, nursing homes and other care environments**, effective food storage is particularly important because many of the people receiving meals may be more vulnerable to foodborne illness.

Food should therefore be stored in a way that protects it from **contamination, harmful bacterial growth, pests, chemicals and physical damage**.

Why Safe Food Storage Matters

Good food storage helps catering teams to:

- Keep food safe and suitable to eat
- Reduce the risk of cross-contamination
- Maintain appropriate food temperatures
- Prevent unnecessary bacterial growth
- Protect food from pests and environmental contamination
- Manage allergens more effectively
- Reduce food waste
- Maintain effective stock rotation
- Identify food that has passed its safe-use date

Safe storage procedures should form part of the organisation's **food safety management system**.

Chilled Food Storage

Foods requiring refrigeration should be transferred to appropriate chilled storage promptly.

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

8°C or below

In practice, refrigerators are commonly operated at approximately:

5°C or below

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

Catering staff should:

- Check refrigerator temperatures according to workplace procedures
- Record temperatures where required
- Keep refrigerator doors closed whenever possible
- Avoid overloading refrigerators
- Allow sufficient space for cold air to circulate
- Report equipment faults or unacceptable temperatures promptly
- Follow corrective-action procedures when required

Separating Raw and Ready-to-Eat Food

Raw foods can contain harmful microorganisms that could contaminate foods that will receive no further cooking.

Where possible, raw and ready-to-eat foods should be stored in **separate refrigerators or designated storage areas** in accordance with the organisation's food safety procedures.

Where the same refrigerator must be used, careful separation is essential.

Raw meat, poultry and fish should be appropriately covered and positioned so that they **cannot drip or leak onto ready-to-eat food**.

Ready-to-eat foods should be protected from contamination throughout storage.

Key Principle

Raw food must never be allowed to contaminate ready-to-eat food.

Frozen Food Storage

Frozen food should remain properly frozen and be stored according to the manufacturer's instructions and workplace procedures.

Staff should:

- Transfer frozen deliveries to freezer storage promptly
- Check freezer temperatures according to workplace procedures
- Keep freezer doors closed as much as possible
- Protect food with suitable packaging or containers
- Clearly identify and date food where required
- Report signs of thawing or equipment failure
- Follow workplace procedures if frozen food has accidentally defrosted

Food should **never be refrozen simply because it still looks or smells acceptable**. Staff should follow the manufacturer's instructions and their organisation's food safety procedures.

Dry Food Storage

Dry goods such as flour, cereals, rice, pasta and unopened packaged foods also require appropriate storage.

Dry-storage areas should be:

- Clean and dry
- Well maintained
- Protected from pests
- Appropriately ventilated
- Organised so food can be inspected and rotated
- Separate from chemicals and cleaning products

Food should generally be kept **off the floor** and stored in appropriate containers or packaging.

Once packaging has been opened, food should be protected appropriately and labelled where required by workplace procedures.

Protecting Food from Contamination

Stored food should be appropriately covered, wrapped or placed in suitable food-grade containers.

Staff should never store food:

- Directly on the floor
- Alongside cleaning chemicals
- In dirty or damaged containers
- Where it may become contaminated by raw food
- In areas affected by pests
- In unsuitable containers that were not intended for food storage

Good Practice Reminder

Safe food storage is not simply about putting food into a refrigerator, freezer or cupboard. Food must be stored at the correct temperature, in the correct place and in a way that protects it from contamination throughout its storage life.

Stock Rotation, Date Labelling & Organising Food Storage

Good organisation is an important part of safe food storage. Catering staff need to know **what food is being stored, when it should be used and whether it remains safe and suitable for use**.

Effective stock rotation and clear date labelling help reduce food waste while preventing food that is no longer safe from being served.

Understanding Use-By Dates

A **use-by date relates to food safety** and is commonly found on foods that can become unsafe after a relatively short period.

Food should **not be eaten, cooked, frozen or served after its use-by date**, even if it looks or smells acceptable.

Catering staff should:

- Check use-by dates regularly.
- Remove food that has passed its use-by date.
- Follow manufacturer storage instructions.
- Ensure appropriate stock rotation.
- Never rely on smell or appearance to determine whether food beyond its use-by date is safe.

Important

Never serve food after its use-by date.

Understanding Best-Before Dates

A **best-before date primarily relates to food quality rather than safety**.

After the best-before date, food may begin to lose some of its expected taste, texture or quality, but this is different from a use-by date.

Catering staff should follow:

- Manufacturer instructions.
- Workplace food safety procedures.
- Organisational quality standards.
- Appropriate stock-control procedures.

Where there is any uncertainty about whether food is suitable for use, seek guidance from the appropriate person.

Stock Rotation

Effective stock rotation helps ensure older stock is used before newer stock where appropriate.

A commonly used principle is:

FIFO – First In, First Out

When new stock arrives, existing suitable stock with the earlier date should generally be positioned so that it is used first.

Good stock rotation includes:

- Checking dates when deliveries arrive.
- Placing newer stock behind appropriate existing stock.
- Regularly inspecting refrigerators, freezers and dry stores.
- Removing expired or unsuitable food promptly.
- Avoiding unnecessary over-ordering.
- Keeping storage areas organised and accessible.

However, staff should always check the **actual date markings** rather than relying solely on where an item is positioned.

Labelling Opened Food

Once some foods are opened, their original shelf life may change.

Manufacturer instructions may state that a product should be refrigerated after opening and used within a specified period.

Where required by workplace procedures, labels may include:

- Product name.
- Date opened.
- Date prepared.
- Use-by or discard date.
- Relevant allergen information.
- Initials or other traceability information.

Never guess when an unlabelled food was opened or prepared.

If required information is missing, follow workplace procedures and seek guidance.

Labelling Food Prepared on Site

Food prepared within the kitchen may also require appropriate identification and date labelling.

This can be particularly important for:

- Prepared meals.
- Sauces and gravies.
- Sandwich fillings.
- Desserts.
- Cooked meats.
- Prepared vegetables.
- Foods cooled for later use.
- Decanted ingredients.

The organisation's food safety management system should specify how these foods are labelled, stored and used safely.

Allergen Awareness During Storage

Safe storage also plays an important role in **allergen management**.

Ingredients containing allergens should be clearly identifiable and stored in accordance with workplace procedures to reduce the risk of accidental cross-contact.

Staff should:

- Keep original labels and ingredient information available where required.
- Avoid transferring ingredients into unidentified containers.
- Keep containers securely closed.
- Follow designated allergen-storage procedures.
- Clean up spills promptly and appropriately.
- Never assume two similar-looking ingredients contain the same allergens.

Accurate labelling is essential when providing food for an individual with a diagnosed food allergy.

Organising Refrigerators and Storage Areas

Well-organised storage makes safe working easier.

Staff should avoid:

- Overcrowding shelves.
- Blocking refrigerator air vents.
- Leaving uncovered food exposed.
- Mixing raw and ready-to-eat foods inappropriately.
- Keeping damaged or leaking packaging.
- Allowing expired stock to accumulate.
- Storing food alongside chemicals.
- Using containers that cannot be identified.

Regular checks help identify problems before they become food safety risks.

Good Practice Reminder

If you do not know what a food is, when it was prepared or opened, or whether it has been stored safely, do not guess. Follow workplace procedures and seek guidance before using or serving it.

Effective **labelling, date checking and stock rotation** protect the people receiving meals while also helping catering teams reduce unnecessary food waste.

Storage Problems, Contamination Risks & Staff Responsibilities

Even when good storage procedures are in place, problems can occur. Refrigeration equipment can fail, packaging can become damaged, food can be stored incorrectly or important labels can become missing.

Catering staff should be able to recognise potential food storage problems and take appropriate action promptly.

In care catering, this is particularly important because many of the people receiving meals may be more vulnerable to the consequences of foodborne illness.

Refrigerator or Freezer Failure

If a refrigerator or freezer is not maintaining the required temperature, staff should act promptly and follow workplace procedures.

Possible warning signs include:

- Temperature readings outside accepted limits
- Food beginning to thaw unexpectedly
- Unusual noises from refrigeration equipment
- Damaged door seals
- Doors not closing correctly
- Excessive ice build-up
- Refrigerators feeling warmer than expected
- Equipment alarms or warning indicators

Staff should report equipment faults immediately and follow the organisation's **corrective-action procedures**.

Important

Do not assume food remains safe simply because the refrigerator or freezer starts working again.

The temperature reached, the type of food involved and how long it may have been outside appropriate temperature control may all need to be considered.

Damaged Packaging

Food packaging helps protect food from contamination.

Food should be checked for signs such as:

- Torn or damaged packaging
- Broken seals
- Leaking containers
- Swollen or damaged cans
- Cracked jars
- Loose or damaged lids
- Evidence of contamination
- Signs of pest activity

Potentially unsafe food should be isolated where appropriate and dealt with according to workplace procedures.

Staff should never simply transfer questionable food into another container and continue using it without appropriate assessment.

Preventing Chemical Contamination

Cleaning chemicals and other hazardous substances must be stored safely and separately from food.

Chemicals should:

- Remain in appropriate labelled containers
- Be stored in designated areas
- Never be placed above or alongside food where leakage could cause contamination
- Never be transferred into food or drink containers
- Be handled according to workplace procedures and manufacturer instructions

Never

Store chemicals in an unlabelled container or in a container that could be mistaken for food or drink.

Pest Contamination

Food storage areas can attract pests if they are not kept clean, organised and properly maintained.

Possible signs of pest activity may include:

- Droppings
- Gnaw marks
- Damaged packaging
- Insects or larvae
- Unusual smells
- Nesting material
- Evidence of food being disturbed

Staff should report suspected pest activity immediately.

Food that may have been contaminated by pests should not be used unless it has been assessed and managed in accordance with the organisation's food safety procedures.

Spillages and Leaking Food

Spillages should be dealt with promptly to reduce contamination, allergen cross-contact, slips and pest risks.

Particular care should be taken with leaking packages containing **raw meat, poultry or fish**, because juices may contaminate shelves, containers or other foods.

Staff should:

- Protect unaffected food
- Remove contaminated items appropriately
- Clean and disinfect affected surfaces using the approved procedure
- Wash hands appropriately afterwards
- Replace contaminated packaging or containers only where it is safe and appropriate to do so
- Report significant contamination where required

Unlabelled or Unidentified Food

Food should not be used simply because a member of staff believes they know what it is or when it was prepared.

If required information is missing, staff should follow workplace procedures.

This is especially important where there may be uncertainty about:

- Preparation or opening dates
- Use-by or discard dates
- Ingredients
- Allergens
- Previous storage conditions

Key Principle

If the identity, safety or storage history of food cannot be established, do not guess.

Staff Responsibilities

Everyone involved in food storage has a responsibility to follow safe working practices.

Catering staff should:

- Follow the organisation's food safety management system
- Store food at appropriate temperatures
- Separate raw and ready-to-eat foods correctly
- Check use-by dates
- Follow stock-rotation procedures
- Label food correctly where required
- Maintain allergen controls
- Keep storage areas clean and organised
- Report equipment faults promptly
- Recognise signs of pests or contamination
- Complete required checks and records accurately
- Take appropriate corrective action when problems occur

Staff should only carry out tasks for which they have received appropriate **information, instruction and training**.

Recording Problems and Corrective Action

Where workplace procedures require records to be maintained, these should be completed accurately.

For example, records may show:

What went wrong → What food was affected → What action was taken → Who was informed → What happened to the affected food

Records should never be altered simply to make a food safety problem appear acceptable.

Good Practice Reminder

Safe food storage depends on good organisation, effective temperature control, accurate labelling, contamination prevention and prompt action when something goes wrong.

In a care catering environment, consistently following these principles helps protect vulnerable individuals and supports safe, professional food service.

Summary

Safe food storage is an essential part of protecting people from foodborne illness and maintaining high standards of food hygiene.

In care catering environments, food should be stored in a way that protects it from **contamination, harmful bacterial growth, allergens, pests, chemicals and physical damage**.

Good practice includes maintaining appropriate temperatures, separating raw and ready-to-eat foods, checking date markings, rotating stock correctly, labelling prepared and opened foods and taking prompt corrective action when problems are identified.

Safe Food Storage Checklist

Before using or storing food, ask:

☐ Is chilled food being stored at the appropriate temperature?

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

☐ Are raw and ready-to-eat foods appropriately separated?

☐ Is food suitably covered, wrapped or stored in appropriate food-grade containers?

☐ Are use-by and best-before dates being checked correctly?

☐ Is stock being rotated effectively?

☐ Are opened and prepared foods labelled and dated where required?

☐ Is allergen information being retained and managed appropriately?

☐ Are dry-storage areas clean, dry and protected from pests?

☐ Are food and cleaning chemicals stored separately?

☐ Is damaged, leaking or potentially contaminated food dealt with promptly?

☐ Are equipment faults and abnormal temperatures reported?

☐ Are required storage checks and corrective actions recorded accurately?

Remember

If you cannot establish what a food is, when it was prepared or opened, or whether it has been stored safely, do not guess. Follow workplace food safety procedures and seek guidance.

Further Information

For further guidance on food storage and food safety, visit:

Food Standards Agency – Chilling

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

Guidance on chilling food safely and maintaining appropriate refrigerated storage.

Food Standards Agency – Best Before and Use-By Dates

https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/best-before-and-use-by-dates

Information explaining the difference between use-by and best-before dates and why date markings are important.

Food Standards Agency – Avoiding Cross-Contamination

https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/avoiding-cross-contamination

Guidance on reducing the risk of cross-contamination when handling and storing food.

Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business

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

Food safety management guidance and resources for food businesses.

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

Resource 031 – Managing Allergens in Care Catering

Resource 032 – Preventing Cross-Contamination in Care Catering

Resource 071 – Food Temperature Control in Care Catering

Together, these resources support good practice across **food storage, temperature control, allergen management and contamination prevention** within care catering environments.

Related FlexiLearnHub Courses

Food Safety & Hygiene Level 2

Develop a broader understanding of food hygiene, safe food handling, storage, contamination prevention and good food safety practice.

HACCP Training

Develop your understanding of food safety hazards, control measures, monitoring and corrective action within a HACCP-based food safety system.

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