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**Knowledge Hub**

*Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality*

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# **Preventing Foodborne Illness in Care Catering**

**A Practical Guide for Care Staff**

**Knowledge Hub Resource 074**

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# Introduction

## Understanding Foodborne Illness in Care Catering

Foodborne illness occurs when a person becomes unwell after consuming food or drink that has been contaminated with **harmful microorganisms, toxins or other hazards**.

In any catering environment, preventing foodborne illness is essential. In care settings, the consequences can be particularly serious because many residents may be **older, frail, living with underlying health conditions or have weakened immune systems**.

Good food-safety practices therefore need to be followed consistently throughout the entire food journey.

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## How Can Food Become Unsafe?

Food can become contaminated at many different stages, including during:

- Delivery
- Storage
- Preparation
- Cooking
- Cooling
- Reheating
- Hot holding
- Transportation
- Meal service

A breakdown in food-safety controls at any of these stages may increase the risk of illness.

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# Common Causes of Foodborne Illness

## Poor Personal Hygiene

Food handlers can transfer harmful microorganisms to food through their hands, clothing or unsafe working practices.

Effective **hand washing and personal hygiene** are therefore fundamental parts of food safety.

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## Cross-Contamination

Cross-contamination occurs when harmful microorganisms are transferred from one food, surface, person or piece of equipment to another.

For example, contamination could be transferred from:

**Raw meat → Hands → Utensils → Work surface → Ready-to-eat food**

Raw and ready-to-eat foods should be appropriately separated, and workplace procedures for cleaning and disinfection must be followed.

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## Inadequate Cooking

Cooking food thoroughly helps destroy harmful microorganisms.

If appropriate cooking procedures are not followed, harmful bacteria may survive and make the food unsafe.

Staff should follow their organisation's approved cooking procedures and complete any required temperature checks.

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# Poor Temperature Control

Certain harmful bacteria can multiply when food requiring temperature control is kept under unsuitable conditions.

Problems can occur when:

- Chilled food becomes too warm
- Cooked food is cooled incorrectly
- Food is inadequately reheated
- Hot food is not held at the required temperature
- Food remains outside appropriate temperature control for too long

Staff should follow the organisation's established **time and temperature controls** rather than estimating whether food is safe.

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# Unsafe Food Storage

Food may become unsafe when it is:

- Stored at an unsuitable temperature
- Kept beyond its use-by date
- Left uncovered or inadequately protected
- Stored close to chemicals
- Exposed to pests
- Stored where raw food can contaminate ready-to-eat food
- Incorrectly labelled or left unidentified

Good stock rotation and appropriate food labelling also help prevent unsafe food from being used.

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## Inadequate Cleaning & Disinfection

Food-contact surfaces and equipment can become sources of contamination when they are not cleaned effectively.

Particular attention should be given to:

- Work surfaces
- Chopping boards
- Knives and utensils
- Food preparation equipment
- Food probes
- Refrigerator handles
- Sinks
- Frequently touched surfaces

Staff should use the **correct cleaning and disinfection procedures, products, dilution and contact times** specified by their workplace.

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## Food Handlers Who Are Unwell

A food handler experiencing certain illnesses may present a risk of contaminating food.

Symptoms such as **vomiting and diarrhoea must be reported promptly** and staff should follow workplace sickness and exclusion procedures.

Staff should never conceal symptoms because the kitchen is busy or short-staffed.

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# Foodborne Illness Is Often Preventable

Preventing foodborne illness does not depend on one single precaution. It requires several controls working together:

**Good hygiene → Safe storage → Separation → Cleaning → Thorough cooking → Temperature control → Safe service**

## Good Practice Reminder

**Never rely on the appearance, smell or taste of food alone to decide whether it is safe. Harmful microorganisms may be present without causing an obvious change to the food.**

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## Preventing Contamination & Controlling Food-Safety Risks

Preventing foodborne illness requires catering staff to control hazards **before they have an opportunity to make food unsafe.**

In a care environment, food-safety precautions should be applied consistently from the moment food is delivered until the meal is safely served.

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## Check Food on Delivery

Food safety begins when ingredients arrive at the premises.

Staff responsible for deliveries should follow workplace procedures and check that:

- Food comes from an approved or appropriate supplier
- Packaging is intact and undamaged
- Chilled and frozen foods arrive under appropriate temperature control
- Food is within its required date
- There are no signs of contamination or pest activity
- Frozen food has not obviously thawed
- Allergen and product information is available where required

Food that does not meet the organisation's acceptance criteria should be dealt with according to workplace procedures rather than simply placed into storage.

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## Store Food Safely

Food should be moved into appropriate storage promptly.

Good practice includes:

- Keeping chilled food appropriately refrigerated
- Maintaining frozen food in suitable frozen storage
- Keeping dry foods clean, dry and protected
- Separating raw foods from ready-to-eat foods
- Keeping food covered or suitably contained
- Following use-by dates
- Applying effective stock rotation
- Protecting food from chemicals, pests and other sources of contamination

Staff should also check storage temperatures at the frequency required by the organisation's food safety system.

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## Prevent Cross-Contamination

Raw foods, particularly raw meat and poultry, can contain harmful microorganisms.

Staff should prevent these microorganisms from reaching ready-to-eat foods by:

- Keeping raw and ready-to-eat foods appropriately separated
- Using designated equipment where required
- Washing hands effectively after handling raw food
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces and equipment correctly
- Using clean utensils
- Storing raw foods safely to prevent leakage or dripping
- Following workplace controls for preparation areas and equipment

Remember that contamination can be transferred indirectly through **hands, utensils, cloths, equipment and food-contact surfaces**.

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## Control Cooking & Reheating

Cooking is an important food-safety control because appropriate heat treatment can destroy harmful microorganisms.

Staff should:

- Follow approved cooking procedures
- Ensure food is thoroughly cooked
- Check temperatures where required
- Use a clean food probe correctly
- Complete required records accurately
- Take corrective action if the required cooking standard has not been achieved

Where food is reheated, it should be reheated according to the organisation's established procedure.

Food that has previously been handled or stored unsafely should **not simply be reheated in an attempt to make it safe.**

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## Cool Food Safely

When cooked food is intended for later use, it needs to be cooled according to the organisation's food safety procedures.

Poor cooling can allow harmful bacteria to multiply.

Staff should:

- Follow the approved cooling method
- Avoid leaving food unnecessarily at room temperature
- Divide or portion food where required by workplace procedures
- Transfer cooled food into appropriate chilled storage promptly
- Protect food from contamination while it is cooling
- Label and date food as required

Never place food into storage and simply assume that it has cooled safely.

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## Maintain Safe Practices During Service

Food can still become unsafe during meal service.

Staff should:

- Maintain required hot or chilled conditions
- Protect meals from contamination
- Use clean serving utensils
- Minimise unnecessary handling
- Follow procedures for transporting food around the care setting
- Observe permitted holding times
- Follow procedures for leftovers and returned food

Extra care may be needed where meals travel some distance from the kitchen to residents.

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## Personal Hygiene & Hand Washing

Hands can easily transfer harmful microorganisms to food and equipment.

Food handlers should wash their hands thoroughly at appropriate times, including:

- Before preparing food
- After handling raw food
- After using the toilet
- After handling waste
- After cleaning activities where contamination may occur
- After coughing, sneezing or touching the face where appropriate
- Whenever hands may have become contaminated

Gloves, where used, **do not replace effective hand hygiene**. They must also be used and changed appropriately to avoid transferring contamination.

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## Protect Ready-to-Eat Food

Ready-to-eat food requires particular protection because it may receive **no further cooking before being consumed**.

Examples include:

- Prepared sandwiches
- Salads
- Cooked sliced meats
- Cheese
- Prepared fruit
- Cold desserts
- Previously cooked chilled foods intended to be served cold

These foods should be protected from contamination throughout storage, preparation and service.

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## Follow the Food Safety Management System

Food businesses are required to have procedures based on **HACCP principles**. In practice, staff should understand the controls relevant to their role and follow the organisation's documented food-safety procedures.

This includes completing required checks and taking action when something is outside an acceptable limit.

### Good Practice Reminder

**Food safety is a continuous process. A meal that was safe after cooking can become unsafe later if it is contaminated, stored incorrectly or handled poorly.**

**Safe delivery → Safe storage → Safe preparation → Safe cooking → Safe holding → Safe service**

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## Recognising Foodborne Illness, Responding to Incidents & Staff Responsibilities

Even where good food-safety procedures are in place, catering staff must know how to **recognise potential problems and respond appropriately**.

In a care environment, concerns about possible foodborne illness should be taken seriously because residents may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of infection, dehydration and deterioration.

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### Recognising Possible Foodborne Illness

Symptoms of foodborne illness can vary depending on the cause, but may include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Abdominal pain or cramps
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Weakness or fatigue
- Feeling generally unwell

Symptoms do not always appear immediately after contaminated food has been consumed. Depending on the organism or cause, illness may develop **hours or sometimes days later**.

Catering staff should not attempt to diagnose the cause of someone's illness. Any concerns should be reported through the organisation's established procedures.

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## When More Than One Person Becomes Unwell

If several residents, staff members or other people develop similar gastrointestinal symptoms, this could indicate a possible **outbreak or shared source of infection**.

Staff should:

- Report concerns immediately to the appropriate manager
- Follow the organisation's outbreak procedures
- Preserve relevant food-safety information and records
- Follow instructions concerning potentially affected food
- Maintain particularly strict hygiene and infection-control practices
- Cooperate with any investigation
- Follow instructions provided by management or relevant authorities

Staff should **not assume that food is responsible**, as vomiting and diarrhoea can have causes unrelated to food. The cause should be investigated appropriately.

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## Do Not Conceal or Destroy Important Information

If foodborne illness is suspected, accurate information may help establish what happened.

Relevant information could include:

- Menus
- Delivery information
- Supplier details
- Food labels and batch information
- Temperature records
- Cooking and reheating records
- Cleaning records
- Staff sickness information
- Details of corrective actions
- Information about which foods were prepared and served

Staff should follow management instructions regarding the retention of relevant food or packaging.

Records should **never be altered, destroyed or retrospectively changed to hide a food-safety problem**.

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# Food Handler Illness

Food handlers can themselves become a source of contamination.

Staff experiencing symptoms such as **vomiting or diarrhoea** should:

- Stop food-handling duties where required
- Report their symptoms promptly
- Follow the organisation's sickness reporting procedure
- Observe the required exclusion period
- Follow instructions before returning to food-handling duties

Food Standards Agency guidance states that people working with or around open food should normally remain away from such work for **48 hours after symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting have stopped naturally**.

## Responding to a Suspected Contamination Incident

If staff believe food may be unsafe:

### 1. Stop

Do not serve or continue using the affected food.

### 2. Isolate

Keep potentially affected food separate so that it cannot accidentally be used.

### 3. Report

Inform the appropriate chef, supervisor, catering manager or other responsible person immediately.

### 4. Investigate

Relevant checks may need to be made according to the organisation's food safety procedures.

### 5. Take Corrective Action

This could include disposing of food, rejecting a delivery, cleaning and disinfecting an area, withdrawing food from service or taking other appropriate action.

### 6. Record

Document the problem and action taken where required.

## Possible Food Recall or Withdrawal

Occasionally, a supplier, manufacturer or food authority may identify a problem with a particular food product.

If the organisation receives a food recall or withdrawal notification, staff should follow workplace procedures promptly.

This may involve:

- Identifying the affected product
- Checking batch or date information
- Removing affected food from use
- Separating it so that it cannot accidentally be served
- Following instructions for disposal or return
- Recording the action taken

Never continue using a product affected by a recall simply because it appears normal.

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## Cleaning After Contamination

Where an area, utensil or piece of equipment has potentially become contaminated, staff should follow the organisation's appropriate **cleaning and disinfection procedure**.

This may include:

- Removing food debris
- Cleaning the affected area
- Applying the correct disinfectant
- Following required dilution instructions
- Allowing the required contact time
- Preventing cleaned areas from becoming recontaminated

Cleaning products should always be used according to their instructions and workplace procedures.

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# Staff Responsibilities

Every member of the catering team contributes to preventing foodborne illness.

Staff should:

- Follow food-safety procedures consistently
  - Maintain high standards of personal hygiene
  - Prevent cross-contamination
  - Follow storage and temperature controls
  - Cook and reheat food according to procedure
  - Protect ready-to-eat foods
  - Complete required checks accurately
  - Report illness and food-safety concerns promptly
  - Take corrective action within their responsibilities
  - Never falsify food-safety records
  - Ask for guidance when unsure
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## Learning from Food-Safety Incidents

When something goes wrong, the purpose of investigating the incident is not simply to identify the immediate problem.

It should also help the organisation understand:

**What happened → Why it happened → What action was taken → How recurrence can be prevented**

This supports continuous improvement in food-safety practice.

### Good Practice Reminder

**Never ignore a food-safety concern because nobody has become ill yet. Early action can prevent contaminated or unsafe food from reaching vulnerable people.**

**Recognise → Stop → Report → Protect → Correct → Record**

## Summary, Practical Checklist & Further Information

Preventing foodborne illness is a fundamental responsibility in care catering. Good food safety depends on **consistent controls throughout the entire food journey**, from delivery and storage through to preparation, cooking and service.

In care environments, these controls are particularly important because many residents may be **older, frail, living with underlying health conditions or have weakened immune systems**.

Foodborne illness can often be prevented through effective personal hygiene, safe storage, prevention of cross-contamination, appropriate temperature control, thorough cooking, effective cleaning and prompt action when something goes wrong.

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# Practical Foodborne Illness Prevention Checklist

Before preparing, handling or serving food, consider:

- ☐ Have I washed and dried my hands appropriately?
- ☐ Are food-contact surfaces and equipment clean and suitable for use?
- ☐ Are raw and ready-to-eat foods appropriately separated?
- ☐ Has food been stored under the correct conditions?
- ☐ Are use-by dates and food labels satisfactory?
- ☐ Has chilled food remained under appropriate temperature control?
- ☐ Has food been cooked and reheated according to workplace procedures?
- ☐ Have required temperature checks been completed accurately?
- ☐ Has cooked food intended for later use been cooled safely?
- ☐ Is ready-to-eat food protected from contamination?
- ☐ Are cleaning and disinfection procedures being followed correctly?
- ☐ Have allergen controls been followed?
- ☐ Is food protected during transportation and meal service?
- ☐ Have any food recalls or withdrawal instructions been acted upon?
- ☐ Have food-safety problems been reported and corrective action taken?
- ☐ Have required food-safety records been completed accurately?
- ☐ Have staff experiencing vomiting or diarrhoea reported their symptoms?

## Remember

**Never serve food when its safety is uncertain. Stop, report the concern and follow the organisation's food safety management procedures.**

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# Further Information

For further professional guidance, staff and organisations can refer to:

## **Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business**

The Food Standards Agency provides practical food-safety management guidance for catering businesses. HACCP-based food safety management helps businesses identify hazards, establish controls and take corrective action when required.

[Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business](#)

## **Food Standards Agency – Food Hygiene**

Official food hygiene guidance covering areas including safe food preparation, personal hygiene, cleaning and prevention of contamination.

[Food Standards Agency – Food Hygiene](#)

## **Food Standards Agency – Fitness to Work**

Food handlers must report relevant illness. FSA guidance states that staff with diarrhoea or vomiting should not return to work until they have been free from symptoms for **48 hours**.

[Food Standards Agency – Fitness to Work Guidance](#)

## **Food Standards Agency – Food Recalls & Alerts**

The FSA publishes information when unsafe products are recalled or withdrawn, including information about the risk and what action should be taken.

Food Standards Agency – Food Recalls & Alerts

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- **Resource 031 – Managing Allergens in Care Catering**
- **Resource 032 – Preventing Cross-Contamination in Care Catering**
- **Resource 071 – Food Temperature Control in Care Catering**
- **Resource 072 – Safe Food Storage in Care Catering**
- **Resource 073 – Food Safety for Vulnerable People in Care Settings**

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