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Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality

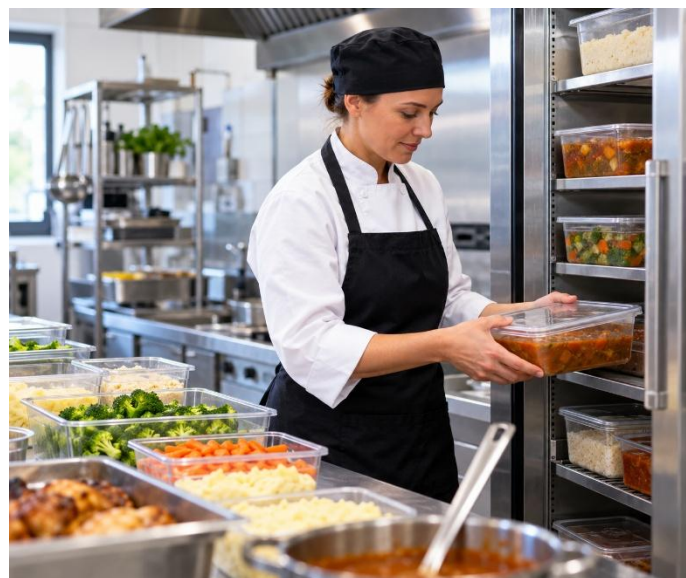
FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Safe Cooling & Reheating of Food in Care Catering

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 077

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Introduction

Understanding Safe Cooling & Reheating

When cooked food is not going to be served immediately, it may need to be **cooled, stored and reheated later**. Each of these stages must be managed carefully to prevent harmful bacteria from multiplying and to keep food safe.

In care catering, effective temperature control is particularly important because many residents may be more vulnerable to the effects of foodborne illness.

Why Is Safe Cooling Important?

Cooking can destroy many harmful bacteria, but cooked food can become unsafe afterwards if it is **cooled too slowly, contaminated during cooling or stored incorrectly**.

As food cools, it passes through temperatures at which bacteria can multiply more readily.

Staff should therefore follow their organisation's approved cooling procedures and move food through the cooling process **as quickly and safely as practicable**.

Cooked food should not simply be left at room temperature for long periods to cool.

Planning Before Cooking

Where food is being prepared in advance, safe cooling should be considered **before cooking begins**.

Staff should know:

- Which food will be served immediately
- Which food is intended for cooling and later use
- How the food will be cooled
- Where it will be stored
- How it will be protected from contamination
- What labelling or date information is required
- Whether cooling checks need to be recorded

Planning ahead helps prevent large quantities of hot food being left in unsuitable conditions because there is insufficient cooling or refrigerated storage capacity.

Cooling Food More Quickly

Depending on the food and workplace procedure, methods that may help food cool more quickly include:

- Dividing food into smaller portions
- Using shallow containers rather than deep containers
- Separating large quantities into smaller batches
- Using appropriate rapid-cooling equipment where available
- Placing containers in a suitable cold-water or ice bath where the procedure permits
- Stirring appropriate foods using clean equipment where this forms part of the approved cooling method

The correct method will depend on the type and quantity of food and the organisation's food safety management system.

Protect Food During Cooling

Food can become contaminated after it has been cooked.

During cooling, staff should protect food from:

- Raw food
- Dirty utensils
- Contaminated work surfaces
- Unwashed hands
- Cleaning chemicals
- Waste
- Pests
- Other environmental contamination

Cooling food should be kept in an appropriate location and handled with clean equipment.

Avoid Overloading Refrigerators

Placing very large quantities of hot food directly into a refrigerator can raise the temperature inside the unit and potentially affect other chilled foods.

Staff should follow their organisation's approved cooling procedure regarding **when and how cooked food should be transferred into refrigeration**.

Refrigerators should also have sufficient space for cold air to circulate appropriately around stored food.

Storing Cooled Food

Once food has been cooled according to the approved procedure, it should be placed into appropriate chilled storage promptly.

Staff should:

- Use suitable food-grade containers
- Cover or otherwise protect food appropriately
- Label and date food according to workplace procedures
- Store it at the required chilled temperature
- Keep it protected from raw-food contamination
- Follow required shelf-life controls
- Use effective stock rotation

If staff cannot establish **when food was prepared, how it was cooled or how long it has been stored**, they should not guess.

Why Is Reheating Important?

Reheating is another important temperature-control stage.

Food being reheated should be heated **thoroughly according to the organisation's approved procedure**, rather than merely warmed to a comfortable serving temperature.

Staff should pay particular attention to:

- Large portions
 - Thick or dense foods
 - Sauces and gravies
 - Casseroles and stews
 - Foods reheated in batches
 - Foods where heating may be uneven
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Reheat Thoroughly

When reheating food, staff should:

- Follow the organisation's approved reheating method
- Ensure the food is thoroughly reheated
- Stir food where appropriate to promote even heating
- Check temperatures where required
- Use a clean and disinfected food probe appropriately
- Complete required records accurately
- Take corrective action if the required standard has not been achieved

In England, the Food Standards Agency advises that when food is reheated it should be **steaming hot all the way through** and that food should only be reheated once.

Reheating Does Not Correct Earlier Unsafe Practice

Reheating should never be regarded as a way of rescuing food that has already been handled unsafely.

For example, food should not simply be reheated and served if:

- Its storage history is unknown
- It has been left under unsuitable conditions
- Its use-by or permitted storage period has passed
- It may have been contaminated
- Staff cannot establish whether it was cooled safely

When the safety of food cannot be confirmed, staff should follow workplace procedures and seek guidance.

Use a Food Probe Correctly

Where temperature checks are required, food probes should be used hygienically and according to workplace procedures.

Remember to:

**Clean/disinfect the probe → Check the food → Record the actual result →
Clean/disinfect the probe again**

Never invent a temperature because the food **looks or feels hot enough**.

Good Practice Reminder

Safe reheating starts with safe cooling and storage. Reheating cannot undo poor food-safety practices that occurred earlier.

Cook safely → Cool safely → Store safely → Reheat thoroughly → Serve safely

Practical Cooling, Storage & Reheating Procedures

Safe cooling and reheating depend on staff following **consistent procedures at every stage**. Once food has been cooked, it must continue to be protected from contamination and inappropriate temperatures until it is served.

Care catering staff should always follow their organisation's food safety management system and any specific time and temperature controls established for the kitchen.

Start Cooling Promptly

Food intended for later use should begin cooling **as soon as practicable after cooking**.

Leaving large quantities of hot food standing unnecessarily can increase the time spent at temperatures where harmful bacteria may multiply.

Staff should:

- Identify food that requires cooling
 - Begin the approved cooling process promptly
 - Keep food protected from contamination
 - Avoid leaving food at room temperature longer than necessary
 - Monitor the cooling process where required
 - Transfer food into appropriate chilled storage according to procedure
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Reduce the Quantity or Depth

Large, deep containers of food can take considerably longer to cool than smaller portions.

Where appropriate, cooling may be assisted by:

- Dividing large quantities into smaller portions
- Using clean, shallow containers
- Separating large batches
- Cutting large cooked items into smaller portions where appropriate
- Using approved rapid-cooling equipment

Any food handling during this process should be carried out hygienically using clean equipment.

Cooling Different Types of Food

Different foods may require different cooling methods.

Sauces, Soups & Gravies

These can retain heat for a considerable period, particularly in deep containers.

Depending on workplace procedures, staff may need to divide them into smaller quantities or use an approved rapid-cooling method.

Cooked Meat & Poultry

Large joints or portions can retain heat internally. Follow the organisation's procedure regarding portioning, cooling and subsequent storage.

Rice

Cooked rice requires careful temperature control because spores of **Bacillus cereus** can survive cooking. If cooked rice is intended for later use, it should be cooled promptly according to the organisation's procedure and stored appropriately.

Prepared Meals

Meals prepared in advance should be cooled, covered, labelled and refrigerated according to the organisation's food safety procedures.

Protect Food Before Refrigeration

Cooling food must remain protected from contamination.

Staff should:

- Use clean food-grade containers
- Keep raw food away from cooling cooked food
- Use clean utensils
- Maintain good hand hygiene
- Keep waste and cleaning activities away from exposed food
- Cover or protect food appropriately according to the cooling procedure

Food should never be placed somewhere simply because it happens to be a convenient space.

Label & Date Cooled Food

Once food has been prepared for chilled storage, appropriate labelling helps staff identify **what the food is and when it can safely be used**.

Workplace procedures may require information such as:

- Name of the food
- Preparation or cooking date
- Cooling date where applicable
- Use-by or discard date
- Other information required by the organisation

Never rely on memory when deciding how long prepared food has been stored.

If the identity or storage history of food cannot be established, **stop and check rather than guessing**.

Store Cooled Food Safely

Once appropriately cooled, food should be transferred into suitable refrigerated storage.

Staff should ensure that:

- Food is appropriately covered or contained
- Raw food cannot contaminate cooked food
- Refrigerators are operating within required limits
- Food is not packed so tightly that appropriate air circulation is prevented
- Stock is rotated correctly
- Required storage periods are followed

Regular refrigerator temperature checks should continue according to workplace procedures.

Preparing Food for Reheating

Before reheating previously cooked food, check that it remains suitable for use.

Consider:

- Has it been stored correctly?
- Is it within the permitted storage period?
- Is the label clear?
- Has it remained protected from contamination?
- Is the storage history known?
- Are there any signs that food safety may have been compromised?

If there is uncertainty, report it before reheating the food.

Reheat Food Thoroughly

Food should be reheated according to the organisation's approved procedure.

Staff should:

- Use appropriate reheating equipment
- Allow sufficient time for thorough heating
- Stir suitable foods to distribute heat evenly
- Pay attention to the centre and thickest parts
- Check temperatures where required
- Record results accurately
- Take corrective action if the required standard has not been achieved

Food should be **steaming hot throughout**, rather than merely warm around the edges.

Microwave Reheating

Microwave ovens can heat food unevenly and create hot and cold spots.

Where microwaves are used, workplace procedures may require staff to:

- Cover food appropriately
- Stir or rotate food during heating
- Allow standing time
- Check that the food is thoroughly heated
- Check temperatures in more than one location where appropriate

Never assume that because one part of the food is very hot, the entire portion has been reheated adequately.

Reheat Only Once

Food Standards Agency guidance advises that food should generally be **reheated only once**.

Repeated cycles of:

Heating → Cooling → Storage → Reheating

can increase opportunities for poor temperature control and contamination.

Staff should therefore plan quantities carefully and follow workplace procedures for leftovers.

After Reheating

Once food has been thoroughly reheated, it should be:

- Served promptly, **or**
- Transferred into appropriate hot-holding arrangements

Staff should continue to protect food from contamination and maintain required temperature controls until it reaches the person receiving the meal.

Never Mix New & Old Batches Without Following Procedure

Adding freshly prepared food to an older batch can make it difficult to establish:

- How long the food has been stored
- How many times it has been heated
- Which use-by or discard time applies

Staff should follow the organisation's procedures for batch management and leftovers.

Good Practice Reminder

Cooling and reheating should form a controlled process, not a series of guesses. Know when the food was cooked, how it was cooled, how it was stored and whether it remains suitable for reheating.

Cook → Cool Promptly → Label → Refrigerate → Check → Reheat Thoroughly → Serve Safely

Problems, Corrective Action, Records & Staff Responsibilities

Even when established procedures are followed, problems can occur during **cooling, chilled storage or reheating**. Catering staff must be able to recognise when food safety may have been compromised and know what action to take.

In care catering, uncertainty should never be ignored simply because food is needed for an approaching meal service.

Recognising Cooling Problems

Possible warning signs during cooling include:

- Food being left at room temperature longer than permitted
- Large quantities of hot food cooling very slowly
- Food being placed in unsuitable containers
- Cooling food being left uncovered or inadequately protected
- Raw food being positioned close to cooling cooked food
- Required cooling checks not being completed
- Refrigerator capacity being insufficient
- Staff being unable to establish when cooling began
- Food being placed into storage without appropriate labelling

If the organisation's cooling requirements have not been met, staff should follow the established **corrective-action procedure**.

Refrigerator Problems

Food that has been safely cooled can still become unsafe if chilled storage fails.

Warning signs may include:

- Refrigerator temperatures outside required limits
- Temperature alarms
- Doors not closing correctly
- Damaged door seals
- Unusual noises
- Loss of electrical power
- Food feeling warmer than expected
- Evidence that the refrigerator has been overloaded
- Temperature records showing a developing problem

Staff should report refrigeration problems promptly and follow workplace procedures for assessing affected food.

Do not assume food is safe simply because the refrigerator later returns to its normal temperature.

Problems During Reheating

Potential reheating problems include:

- Food not becoming thoroughly hot
- Cold areas remaining within the food
- Uneven microwave heating
- Insufficient reheating time
- Inappropriate equipment being used
- Required temperature checks not being completed
- Food failing to achieve the organisation's specified reheating standard
- Uncertainty about whether the food has previously been reheated

Where required standards have not been achieved, staff should **stop and take corrective action before the food is served.**

What Should Staff Do When Something Goes Wrong?

A useful approach is:

1. Stop

Do not serve food when its safety is uncertain.

2. Separate

Keep affected food away from food known to be safe.

3. Check

Establish what has happened using available information, temperature checks, labels and records.

4. Report

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

5. Take Corrective Action

Follow the organisation's food safety management procedures.

6. Record

Document the problem and action taken where required.

When Food Should Not Simply Be Reheated

Reheating is **not a corrective measure for every food-safety problem**.

Food should not simply be reheated in an attempt to make it safe when:

- Its storage history is unknown
- It may have been left at an unsuitable temperature
- Its permitted storage period has expired
- There is evidence of contamination
- Safe cooling cannot be confirmed
- Staff cannot establish whether it has already been reheated
- Its identity or preparation date cannot be established

Some hazards or toxins may not be made safe simply by reheating the food.

When safety cannot be established, follow workplace procedures rather than taking unnecessary risks.

Power Failure & Equipment Breakdown

Loss of power or failure of refrigeration or reheating equipment requires prompt action.

Staff should:

- Report the failure immediately
- Keep refrigerator and freezer doors closed where appropriate
- Check temperatures according to workplace procedures
- Identify potentially affected food
- Move food only when instructed or permitted by the food safety procedure
- Protect food from contamination
- Record relevant temperatures and times
- Follow management instructions regarding use or disposal

Do not automatically discard everything or automatically keep everything. The appropriate action should be based on the organisation's food safety procedures and the circumstances of the incident.

Accurate Temperature Records

Where cooling and reheating temperatures are recorded, the information should reflect **what actually happened**.

Records may include:

- Food or dish being checked
- Date
- Time
- Cooling checks
- Refrigerated storage checks
- Reheating temperature
- Corrective action
- Name or initials of the person completing the check

Staff should never:

- Invent a temperature
- Copy a previous reading
- Record a check that was not performed
- Change an unacceptable temperature to an acceptable one
- Complete records retrospectively from memory unless specifically permitted and accurately identified under workplace procedure

Accurate records help demonstrate that food-safety controls are actually being followed.

Using Food Probes Safely

Food probes used during cooling and reheating can themselves transfer contamination if handled incorrectly.

Staff should:

- Keep probes clean and hygienically stored
- Clean and disinfect them appropriately before and after use
- Check the appropriate part of the food
- Avoid cross-contamination between different foods
- Follow procedures for checking probe accuracy
- Report damaged or unreliable equipment

A temperature reading is only useful if the thermometer itself is **suitable, accurate and used correctly**.

Managing Leftovers

Leftovers should be managed according to the organisation's food safety procedures.

Staff should not automatically save food simply to reduce waste.

Considerations may include:

- How long the food has been held
- Whether it has already been reheated
- Whether it has left controlled kitchen/service conditions
- Whether contamination could have occurred
- Whether its temperature history is known
- Whether workplace procedures permit further storage

Food returned from a resident's plate should **never be returned to general food stock for reuse**.

Staff Responsibilities

Catering staff involved in cooling and reheating should:

- Follow approved cooling procedures
 - Protect food from contamination
 - Label and date food correctly
 - Maintain appropriate chilled storage
 - Follow permitted storage periods
 - Reheat food thoroughly
 - Complete required temperature checks
 - Use food probes hygienically
 - Report equipment problems promptly
 - Take corrective action when required
 - Complete records accurately
 - Follow procedures for leftovers
 - Never guess when food safety is uncertain
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Managers & Supervisors

Those responsible for managing catering operations should ensure that:

- Appropriate cooling procedures are established
- Suitable refrigeration capacity is available
- Staff understand reheating requirements
- Thermometers are available and maintained
- Temperature records are monitored
- Equipment failures are addressed
- Corrective actions are understood
- Staff receive appropriate instruction and training

Repeated failures should be investigated rather than treated as isolated incidents.

Maintaining the Safety Chain

Safe cooling and reheating depend on every stage being controlled:

Cook → Cool → Protect → Label → Chill → Check → Reheat → Serve

If one part of that chain fails, staff should **stop, assess the problem and take appropriate action.**

Good Practice Reminder

Never change a temperature record to make food appear safe. An unacceptable result is a signal to take corrective action — not to change the result.

Summary, Practical Cooling & Reheating Checklist & Further Information

Safe cooling and reheating are important parts of food temperature control in care catering. Food that has been cooked safely can become unsafe afterwards if it is **cooled too slowly, contaminated during cooling, stored incorrectly or inadequately reheated**.

In care environments, these controls are particularly important because meals may be provided to people who are **older, frail, living with underlying health conditions or otherwise more vulnerable to foodborne illness**.

Staff should follow the organisation's food safety management procedures throughout the entire process:

Cook → Cool Promptly → Protect → Label → Chill → Check → Reheat Thoroughly → Serve Safely

Practical Cooling & Reheating Checklist

When cooling, storing or reheating cooked food, consider:

- ☐ Has the food been cooked according to workplace procedures?
- ☐ Has cooling started promptly?
- ☐ Am I using the organisation's approved cooling method?
- ☐ Has a large quantity been divided into smaller portions where appropriate?
- ☐ Is the food protected from contamination while cooling?
- ☐ Has unnecessary time at room temperature been avoided?
- ☐ Has the food been transferred into appropriate chilled storage?
- ☐ Has the food been correctly labelled and dated?
- ☐ Is the refrigerator operating within required limits?
- ☐ Has raw food been kept appropriately separated from cooked food?
- ☐ Is the food still within the organisation's permitted storage period?

- ☐ Can its preparation, cooling and storage history be confirmed?
- ☐ Has the food been reheated thoroughly according to procedure?
- ☐ Have required temperature checks been completed?
- ☐ Has the food probe been cleaned and disinfected appropriately?
- ☐ Has the actual temperature been recorded accurately?
- ☐ Has food generally been reheated only once?
- ☐ Have equipment or temperature-control problems been reported?
- ☐ Has corrective action been taken where required?
- ☐ If food safety cannot be confirmed, has the food been withheld from service?

Remember

Reheating cannot correct every earlier food-safety failure. If the safe cooling, storage or handling history of food cannot be established, do not simply reheat it and assume it is safe.

Further Information

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

Food Standards Agency – Cooking Your Food

Official guidance covering cooking and reheating food safely, including the importance of ensuring reheated food is steaming hot throughout.

[Food Standards Agency – Cooking Your Food](#)

Food Standards Agency – Chilling

Official guidance covering chilled storage and temperature control, including practical advice on cooling cooked food safely.

[Food Standards Agency – Chilling](#)

Food Standards Agency – Safer Food, Better Business

Practical food-safety management guidance covering cooking, chilling, cross-contamination, cleaning and management procedures.

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

Food Standards Agency – HACCP

Official information about food safety management procedures based on **Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP)** principles.

[Food Standards Agency – HACCP](#)

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

- **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**
- **Resource 074 – Preventing Foodborne Illness in Care Catering**
- **Resource 075 – Kitchen Cleaning & Disinfection in Care Catering**
- **Resource 076 – Food Delivery Checks in Care Catering**

Related FlexiLearnHub Courses

- **Food Safety & Hygiene Level 2**
- **HACCP Training**

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