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Professional Resources for Care, Catering & Hospitality

FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Managing Food Recalls and Product Withdrawals in Care Catering

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 085

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INTRODUCTION

This free professional guide explains how catering staff should respond when food supplied to a care setting is affected by a product withdrawal, food recall, allergy alert or other food-safety warning.

It covers identifying affected products, stopping their use, isolating stock, checking whether food has already been served, reporting concerns and maintaining accurate records.

FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Catering, Food Safety & Kitchen Compliance Resources

Suitable for care home cooks, chefs, kitchen assistants, catering managers and staff responsible for receiving, storing, preparing or serving food.

IMPORTANT

This guide supports awareness and good practice.

Staff must follow their organisation's food-safety management system, recall procedure, supplier instructions and reporting arrangements.

Catering staff should not make independent decisions about returning, disposing of or continuing to use affected food unless authorised to do so.

WHY FOOD PRODUCTS MAY BE RECALLED OR WITHDRAWN

Food may be withdrawn or recalled when a problem means it may be unsafe, unsuitable or incorrectly described.

Reasons may include:

• Contamination with harmful bacteria such as *Listeria monocytogenes* or *Salmonella*.

• Undeclared or incorrectly declared allergens.

• Foreign objects such as plastic, metal or glass.

• Chemical contamination.

• Incorrect labelling or packaging.

• Manufacturing or processing faults.

• Products being placed in the wrong packaging.

• Concerns about ingredients or suppliers.

• Failure to meet legal food-safety requirements.

In care settings, prompt action is particularly important because residents may be older, living with medical conditions or otherwise more vulnerable to serious illness.

UNDERSTANDING WITHDRAWALS AND RECALLS

PRODUCT WITHDRAWAL

A product withdrawal removes unsafe food from the supply chain before it has reached the consumer.

A care-catering service may receive a withdrawal notice from a supplier, purchasing department, manufacturer, local authority or another authorised source.

PRODUCT RECALL

A recall is required when unsafe food may already have reached consumers and action is needed to retrieve it or advise people what to do.

In a care setting, this may require checking whether the product has already been prepared, served or consumed.

ALLERGY ALERT

An allergy alert may be issued when allergen information is missing, incorrect or unclear.

An affected product may present a serious risk to residents with a relevant food allergy, intolerance or coeliac disease.

FOOD ALERT FOR ACTION

A Food Alert for Action may be issued when specific action is required from local authorities and food businesses.

Staff must follow all instructions communicated through management or the organisation’s authorised food-safety procedures.

HOW RECALL INFORMATION MAY BE RECEIVED

Information about a withdrawal or recall may arrive through:

- A supplier or manufacturer notification.
- The organisation's purchasing or procurement department.
- Head office or senior management.
- A local authority environmental health or trading standards service.
- A Food Standards Agency food or allergy alert.
- An approved electronic alert system.
- A telephone call or email from an authorised contact.
- Information accompanying a food delivery.

Recall information should be treated seriously and passed immediately to the responsible person.

Staff should verify unexpected or suspicious messages through an approved contact or official source before acting on unauthorised instructions.

CHECKING THE RECALL OR WITHDRAWAL NOTICE

Read the notification carefully and identify:

- The exact product name.
- The manufacturer or brand.
- The pack size.
- The batch, lot or production code.
- The use-by or best-before date.
- Any barcode or other identifying information.
- The reason for the withdrawal or recall.
- The food-safety or allergen risk.

• The action the business has been instructed to take.

• Who issued the notification.

• Who to contact for further information.

Do not assume that every pack of a particular product is affected. Equally, do not assume that a product is safe simply because it looks, smells or tastes normal.

Check all identifying details against the notification.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS FOR CATERING STAFF

When a recall or withdrawal notification is received:

• Stop using and serving the potentially affected product immediately.

• Inform the catering manager or responsible person.

• Locate all affected stock.

• Check storage areas, refrigerators, freezers and dry stores.

• Check opened packs, decanted ingredients and part-used products.

• Check food that has already been prepared using the affected ingredient.

• Clearly isolate affected stock from food that remains available for use.

• Prevent the product from being used accidentally.

• Follow the organisation's procedure for labelling or securing isolated stock.

• Record the quantity and location of affected products.

• Do not return, destroy or dispose of the product until instructed.

The responsible person should coordinate further action and communication.

IDENTIFYING ALL AFFECTED STOCK

A thorough stock check may need to include:

• Unopened packs.

• Opened or part-used packs.

• Products stored in different kitchen areas.

• Food transferred into storage containers.

• Frozen portions.

• Prepared meals.

• Chilled desserts or snacks.

• Food stored on serving trolleys.

• Stock held in satellite kitchens or other units.

• Products received on different delivery dates.

• Food awaiting service or distribution.

Where food has been removed from its original packaging, traceability may be more difficult. Good date labelling, batch information, delivery records and recipe documentation can help identify whether it is affected.

If staff cannot confirm whether a product or prepared meal is affected, it should be isolated and reported for a management decision.

ISOLATING AFFECTED FOOD SAFELY

Affected food should be kept separate from usable stock.

Follow the organisation's procedure to:

• Place the product in a designated secure area.

• Keep chilled or frozen products at the required temperature unless instructed otherwise.

• Prevent staff from opening, using, moving or serving the product.

• Clearly identify the stock as unavailable for use.

• Keep returned or recalled food separate from ordinary waste.

• Record the quantity placed into isolation.

• Restrict access to authorised staff.

Do not place affected food back into normal stock.

Do not remove original packaging, batch codes or date information because these details may be needed for identification, investigation or return.

CHECKING WHETHER FOOD HAS ALREADY BEEN SERVED

The responsible person should establish whether the affected product has already been:

• Opened or used.

• Included in another dish.

• Served to residents.

• Sent to another unit or service area.

• Used in texture-modified meals.

• Provided as a snack, supplement or packed meal.

• Consumed by someone with a relevant allergy or dietary risk.

Useful information may include:

• Menus and production records.

• Delivery and stock records.

• Recipe and ingredient information.

• Temperature and meal-service records.

• Allergen information.

• Resident dietary records.

• Records of meals sent to other areas.

If affected food may have been consumed, staff must report this immediately and follow the organisation's escalation procedure.

Catering staff should not provide medical advice. Any health concerns must be referred promptly to the appropriate care, clinical or emergency personnel.

ALLERGEN-RELATED RECALLS

An allergen recall may involve a product containing an allergen that is missing or incorrectly stated on the label.

When an allergy alert is received:

• Stop using the product immediately.

• Check the exact allergen involved.

• Identify residents who may be at risk.

• Check whether the product has been used in meals, snacks or desserts.

• Inform the catering manager and appropriate care staff.

• Preserve relevant packaging and ingredient information.

• Record whether the product may already have been served.

• Follow the organisation's emergency and incident-reporting procedures where exposure may have occurred.

Never rely on memory when checking residents' dietary requirements. Use the current approved dietary or care information.

COMMUNICATING THE RECALL

Clear communication helps prevent affected food from being used accidentally.

Information may need to be shared with:

- Catering managers.
- Kitchen and serving staff.
- Care staff.
- Senior management.
- Procurement or purchasing teams.
- Other kitchens or units supplied by the service.
- The organisation's food-safety lead.
- Relevant clinical or healthcare staff.
- The supplier or manufacturer.
- The local authority or another enforcement body where required.

Only authorised staff should communicate externally on behalf of the organisation.

Information should be accurate, factual and based on the official notification. Staff should not speculate about the cause, risk or outcome.

RETURNING OR DISPOSING OF AFFECTED FOOD

The withdrawal or recall notification should explain what must happen to the affected product.

Instructions may include:

- Returning the product to the supplier.
- Holding it for collection.
- Disposing of it through an approved waste route.
- Retaining it for investigation.

• Providing photographs or product information.

• Recording the quantity returned or destroyed.

Staff must not dispose of an affected product unless authorised.

When disposal is approved:

• Follow the organisation's waste procedure.

• Prevent the food from being recovered or used.

• Maintain any required temperature or security controls until disposal.

• Record what was disposed of, when, how and by whom.

• Retain evidence required by the supplier, organisation or enforcement authority.

RECORD KEEPING AND TRACEABILITY

Accurate records help demonstrate that the recall or withdrawal was managed effectively.

Records may include:

• A copy of the original notification.

• The date and time it was received.

• The person who received it.

• Product, batch and date information.

• The quantity of affected stock located.

• Where the stock was found.

• Whether any product had already been used or served.

• Meals or recipes containing the affected product.

• Residents, units or service areas potentially affected.

• Staff and managers informed.

• Stock isolated, returned or disposed of.

• Advice received from suppliers or authorities.

• Corrective action taken.

• The date the incident was closed.

Records should be factual, legible, complete and stored in accordance with organisational procedure.

PREPARING FOR FUTURE RECALLS

Care-catering services should be prepared before a recall occurs.

Good preparation may include:

• Maintaining approved supplier information.

• Keeping delivery and traceability records.

• Retaining original labels or relevant product information.

• Using effective date and stock-rotation systems.

• Keeping accurate recipes and allergen information.

• Ensuring decanted products remain identifiable.

• Assigning responsibility for receiving and acting on alerts.

• Subscribing to appropriate food and allergy alert services.

• Training staff in the organisation’s recall procedure.

• Maintaining current emergency contact details.

• Testing the recall procedure periodically.

• Reviewing incidents and improving controls where necessary.

A simulated recall exercise can help an organisation test whether affected food can be identified and located quickly.

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

Do not:

• Ignore or delay action on a recall notification.

• Rely only on the product name without checking batch and date information.

• Assume that opened or decanted products are unaffected.

• Leave recalled stock in normal storage without clear controls.

• Destroy packaging or identifying information too early.

• Return affected food to use because it appears normal.

• Dispose of stock without authorisation or records.

• Forget to check prepared meals and food supplied to other areas.

• Communicate unverified information.

• Hide missed checks, missing stock or mistakes.

• Close the incident before all required actions have been confirmed.

FOOD RECALL AND WITHDRAWAL CHECKLIST

☐ Stop using and serving the product.

☐ Inform the responsible person immediately.

☐ Check the exact product, batch and date details.

☐ Search all relevant storage and preparation areas.

☐ Check opened, decanted and part-used products.

☐ Identify prepared meals containing the product.

☐ Isolate affected stock securely.

☐ Prevent accidental use or service.

☐ Check whether any affected food has already been served.

☐ Escalate possible consumption promptly.

☐ Follow instructions for return, collection or disposal.

☐ Record all stock, communication and action taken.

☐ Retain the notification and relevant evidence.

☐ Confirm that the incident has been formally closed.

KEY MESSAGE

Food withdrawals and recalls require prompt, controlled and well-recorded action.

Stop using the product, check its identifying details, locate and isolate all affected stock, inform the responsible person and establish whether any food has already been served.

Never return, dispose of or continue using affected food without following authorised instructions.

OFFICIAL FURTHER INFORMATION

Food Standards Agency – Recalls and Alerts

https://www.food.gov.uk/about-us/recalls-and-alerts

Food Standards Agency – News and Food Alerts

https://www.food.gov.uk/news-alerts

Food Standards Agency – Operational Safety and Food Incidents

https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/operational-safety

Food Standards Agency – Guidance on Food Traceability, Withdrawals and Recalls

https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/food-traceability-withdrawals-and-recalls-guidance.pdf

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