

A guide to food hazards and your business



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Introduction

Anyone who sells or processes food and is covered by the Food Safety (General Food Hygiene) Regulations 1995 is legally bound to make sure they carry out their operations safely and hygienically (similar Regulations apply in Northern Ireland). The Regulations emphasise the need to control risks. They say that you must:

- **identify** all steps in your activities that are **critical to food safety**
- ensure **adequate safety controls** are in place, maintained and reviewed

Controls do not need to be complex but they must be effective. There are internationally recognised formal packages that can be used by food businesses to help ensure that hazards are identified and controls are in place. Such systems, which focus on prevention and the control of practices and procedures, have a proven record of providing sound consumer protection. However, they are not compulsory and many businesses do not require this level of control.

This booklet, which covers businesses throughout the United Kingdom, gives a short introduction to what this is likely to mean for you. But the guidance is advisory – it is up to each individual food business to check how the Regulations apply to them in practice.



Which food businesses are covered by the Regulations?

The Regulations apply to all types of food business – from a hot dog van to a five star restaurant, from a village hall where food is prepared, to a vending machine. They apply whether the food is sold publicly or privately, for profit or for fundraising. But they do not apply to food cooked at home for private consumption.

Some businesses should follow other regulations that apply to their specific product. Generally, these are suppliers and producers of products of animal origin, such as dairies, meat processors or wholesale fish markets. Consult your local environmental health officer for more information.

What is required?

You should look at your business operations, identify areas of potential harm to customers, and satisfy yourself that you have sufficient controls in place to minimise such risks.

For example, if you store perishable ready-to-eat foods, such as meat or fish products, at room temperature for long periods, there is a hazard that harmful bacteria could grow to dangerous levels on the food. Refrigeration is a mechanism you can use to help control this hazard.



What do you need to do?

Identify potential hazards (things that might be harmful):

- Assess what possible food hazards there are in your business.
- Identify the areas where they could occur.
- Pinpoint those areas that are critical to ensuring food safety.

Introduce controls:

- Make sure you have adequate safety controls in place at those points critical to ensuring food safety.
- Regularly monitor the controls to check they are working effectively.
- Maintain and review all controls.
- Review your assessment, control and monitoring procedures periodically, and whenever the food operations change.

These are principles that underlie a formal system known as HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points). But the Regulations do not require that businesses use any specific or formal system.

The nature and complexity of the system used will, in practice, depend on the nature and complexity of the business you operate. You do not need to keep written records of your analysis and monitoring procedures, though you may find them particularly useful if you run a large business or a small but 'high-risk' business. Also, records may be helpful when demonstrating compliance with the Regulations.

It is possible you have all the necessary controls in place already. Even so, by going through the process of assessing potential hazards, you might notice potential problems you had not considered before. You will certainly be able to check your controls are working properly. This is particularly important at points in your operation – after which no further controls are applied – that would eliminate or control food safety hazards.

Hazard analysis will also help you comply with other requirements of the Regulations, by helping you to decide what level of control is necessary and appropriate to your business.



Who benefits?

Many food poisoning incidents are the result of poor practices, which only come to light after incidents have occurred.

By analysing the potential hazards in your business and being aware of those activities that may be critical to food safety, you can reduce the likelihood of problems actually occurring and causing harm. This is good for your customers and good for your business.

How do I start?

Identify hazards

You need to identify all hazards and decide which are critical for food safety. If no major hazards exist, your analysis can simply be based on your own judgement, with no need for specialist skills or complicated techniques.

Whichever method you choose, it should be systematic and should take into account:

- all potential hazards
- all aspects of your food business operation
- your actual working procedures and conditions

You may find it helpful to draw a flow diagram of your operation from purchase of ingredients through to the sale or service of the food. Food hazards can then be identified at each step and any necessary controls put in place.

Many food manufacturers and high-risk food businesses may prefer a more structured system, using written records of hazard analysis to set up effective control. Specialists such as food research and trade associations can give further advice or sources of advice on how to do this, as can your environmental health services.

This table shows some, but not all, of the potential steps, hazards, controls and monitoring procedures a caterer might need to consider.

Step	Hazard	Control	Monitoring
Purchase and delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Harmful bacteria, mould or foreign bodies present in or on food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use reputable suppliers ● Check goods on receipt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Check delivery vehicles, date marks, temperatures and condition of food
Storage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bacterial growth or further contamination by micro-organisms, chemicals, etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Store at safe temperatures ● Cover or wrap foods ● Separate raw and cooked foods ● Stock rotation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Check temperatures and date marks ● Check storage conditions
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bacterial growth or further contamination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Limit handling times ● Use clean equipment ● Good personal hygiene ● Hygienic premises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Visual checks ● Cleaning schedules
Cooking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Survival of harmful bacteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adequate cooking e.g. cook to a safe centre temperature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cooking times ● Routine temperature checks
Further storage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Growth of bacteria ● Further contamination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Store at safe temperatures ● Cover or wrap foods ● Separate raw and ready-to-eat foods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Check temperatures ● Visual checks



What sorts of hazards are there?

There are essentially three categories of food hazard: microbiological, chemical or physical.

Microbiological

- Could harmful bacteria be present in or on the food (e.g. raw meat)?
- Could foods, particularly ready-to-eat foods, become contaminated?
- Could harmful bacteria grow to dangerous levels in the food?
- Could harmful bacteria survive a process, such as cooking, meant to destroy them?

Chemical

- Could toxic chemicals (e.g. cleaning chemicals) get into the food?

Physical

- Could dangerous glass shards or pests get into the food?



Introducing controls

When considering controls, remember:

- They must be effective.

The controls should either completely eliminate the hazard or reduce it to a safe, acceptable level.

- They should be practical.

Try to ensure that controls can be applied to your business in a realistic and sensible way. You could change either the nature of the control or the operation.

- They should be understood.

You should tell appropriate staff about the importance of any controls in place, particularly any for which they are responsible.

Examples of possible controls:

- buying supplies from reputable suppliers
- checks on raw materials
- proper stock rotation of food and ingredients
- separating different types of food to prevent cross-contamination
- using foods within date marks
- cooking and reheating
- food temperature holding controls – i.e. during display/storage
- good staff hygiene
- food hygiene training
- effective cleaning routines
- pest control

Remember, once you have accepted any materials it is your responsibility to ensure that they are safe.

You may not have direct control over all potential food hazards. For example, your supplier may initially be responsible for the safety of the raw material. But you can help by specifying a safe chill temperature at which the raw material should be supplied. Remember, once you have accepted any materials it is your responsibility to ensure that they are safe.

In identifying appropriate controls, ask yourself if you have done all the things required by food safety law. Are the generally accepted industry standards in place? You may also wish to consult any relevant Industry Guides to good hygiene practice (see page 15).



Checking controls

Identifying and controlling food hazards is, of course, a continuing process. Once the critical control points have been identified and controls put in place you need to monitor them regularly.

You may find that simple records of checks – for example of the temperature of chilled food in a cabinet – can help you to ensure that the correct temperature is maintained and that controls are working effectively.

How you monitor controls, and how often, will depend on the size and nature of your business. Ideally, you should have a target to check against, for example:

- date marks
- storage/delivery temperatures against a specified level
- cleaning procedures against a cleaning schedule
- personal hygiene practices against company manual/rules

Whether you record and document your system is up to you. However, by law, you must:

- ensure that controls are working effectively, and that your food is safe for the customer
- take action if you find the controls are not operating effectively
- review your system regularly and especially if the way you work alters
- take remedial action if your checks show problems with the controls you have in place



Official control

Enforcement officers can advise you about the requirements of food safety law and help you with advice on identifying and controlling food hazards. They may want to discuss procedures and operating practices in some detail and can give advice on how to improve them. However, in the end, it is still your responsibility to ensure that any activity critical to food safety is under adequate control. The enforcement officers' role is to help and advise you on the safe production, distribution and sale of food. In some cases it may be necessary to take action to help avoid any risks to customers.

Where can I get further information?

Trade associations and Industry Guides to good hygiene practice may provide general advice on hazard analysis for food businesses within an industry sector. You can use this information to help identify typical hazards and practical control measures for your business, but you should ensure that it is appropriate to your own business.

Industry Guides are published by the Chadwick House Group Ltd. You can order them online at www.shop.cieh.net or by calling 020 7827 5882.

The Environmental Health Services of your local authority (or district council in Northern Ireland) will also be able to provide help and advice.

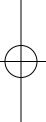
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