

Keeping food safe on a picnic

How to make sure the food you take on a picnic stays fresh and safe to eat.

In the summertime, there's nothing nicer than eating a picnic in the fresh air. But when we take food outdoors, it can be easy to let our usual food hygiene standards slip, bringing the risk of [food poisoning](#). So, it's really important to remember the 4Cs:

- [cleaning](#)
- [chilling](#)
- [cooking](#)
- [avoiding cross-contamination](#)

Keep things clean on a picnic

Wash fresh fruits (including those with rinds), vegetables, and salad leaves thoroughly under running tap water before packing them in the cool box.

Wash your hands before preparing your picnic and, where possible, before eating it. If it's not possible to wash your hands at your picnic site, you can use hand sanitising wipes or gels to disinfect them before handling food. Using hand sanitiser kills most bacteria on your hands.

Chill your picnic food

The time between preparing dishes and eating them tends to be longer than normal when you're picnicking. So, plan ahead to keep your food cool until you're ready to eat. Any foods which you would usually keep in the fridge at home also need to be kept cool on your picnic. This includes:

- any food with a use-by date
- cooked dishes
- prepared salads and sandwiches
- dairy products
- any ready to eat foods like dips or spreads
- any ready-to-eat snacks such as sausage rolls, cocktail sausages, quiches
- children's picnic and lunchbox snacks
- yoghurts
- pre-cut fruit and veg

Place these foods in a cool box or cool bag with ice or frozen gel packs. Distribute ice packs throughout the box or bag, not all at the bottom so that all the contents can be kept cold. You can also use frozen drinks to help keep your cool box cold.

Also, try and minimise the number of times you open your cool box. This helps to keep the contents cold for longer. For example, if you're using more than one cool box, pack perishable foods in one and drinks in another.

Take out cold food only as you need it. This will not only be safer but will mean that any food not eaten is kept at the right temperature to be enjoyed later. If you can, leave your cool box/food in a shady spot and out of direct sunlight to help keep it as chilled as possible.

Pack away your picnic once you've eaten

Once you've served up your picnic, put any remaining food back in the cool box to keep cool. If you're out for less than four hours and the food still feels cool when you get home, you can put it back in your fridge.

After four hours or more at warm temperatures ([8 °C and above](#)), the risk from bacteria increases, and food may become unsafe to eat. In extremely hot weather, use food that's been out of the fridge within 2 hours.

If the food temperature has reached 8°C or above, these foods should be discarded after 4 hours (unless refrigerated within 4 hours or 2 hours in extreme heat). Please see [our chilling advice](#) for more information.

To reduce [food waste](#), work out portion sizes and the size of your party, and only pack what you need.

Food poisoning and vulnerable people

Many people mistakenly think that [food poisoning](#) is just a passing 'tummy bug' but it can be very serious. Find out more about the [symptoms of food poisoning](#) and what to do if someone has severe symptoms on the NHS website. If you're Northern Ireland, you want to read [NI Direct's info on food poisoning](#).

Food poisoning can be caused by various bacteria including:

- [Campylobacter](#)
- [Salmonella](#)
- [Listeria](#)
- [E. coli](#)

Most people with food poisoning recover at home and don't need any specific treatment but some people are at increased risk of food poisoning and extra caution should be taken with what they eat. These can include:

- young children (under 5 years)
- pregnant women and their unborn babies
- older people
- people with an underlying health condition such as diabetes, liver disease, or cancer

It is important to note that [some foods, for example soft mould ripened cheeses, deli meat and smoked fish, have a higher risk of listeria](#).

Allergies

It is important to ask and understand the steps to take if anyone has a food allergy, intolerance or suffers from coeliac disease before preparing food for people, because these could cause serious illness or be life threatening. We have more information on [preparing an allergy-safe meal and avoiding cross-contamination of allergens](#).