

Food safety for community cooking and food banks

Hygiene and allergy advice for individuals and groups preparing meals to share in their community.

This guidance provides food safety information and guidance for individuals or groups wishing to prepare meals at home for their community. This can include preparing or donating meals for individuals, community groups and local organisations.

Food provided for community groups must comply with food law and be safe to eat.

You may not need to hold a food hygiene certificate to provide food for charity or community groups. However, you need a suitable level of knowledge to make sure that you handle food safely.

Registration

You may need to [register as a food business](#) if you, or your operation, provide food to the community, even if it's free, 28 days before you start providing food.

We have specific advice on when and [how to register as a food business](#).

Before providing food to the community, contact your [local authority food safety team](#) to discuss registration requirements.

As a food business operator, you need to follow the relevant food safety and hygiene requirements, outlined in this guidance. Registering as a food business means your operation may [receive inspections from authorised officers and be given a food hygiene rating](#), if applicable.

If you only **occasionally** provide food to the community, you may not need to register as a food business. However, the food you provide should still be safe to eat and we recommend you follow the food safety and hygiene best-practices listed in this guide. Check with your [local food safety team](#) to see if you need to register.

As a food business operator, your local food safety team can provide further support and advice on matters in this guidance.

We also have food safety and hygiene guidance for [hosting or providing food at a community or charity event](#).

As an existing food business you are required to contact your local authority to update them on any significant change in food activities being carried out at your premises.

Examples of a significant change would be:

- a registered cake maker now preparing meals

- a registered food bank, which previously distributed prepacked low-risk foods, now distributing higher-risk foods such as peeled vegetables and prepared foods.

Many existing home caterers and food banks will already be registered with their local authority, but some operators will not have had to register when they started operating.

If your activities have changed significantly, you may now need to register with your local authority. They will assist you in assessing whether your previously unregistered operation now needs to be registered.

Food hygiene when cooking for your community or donating food

[Good food hygiene](#) makes sure the food you serve is safe to eat. Ensure your operation is familiar with and follows the four main areas:

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

Following guidance on [personal hygiene](#), such as handwashing, will also help ensure high food safety standards.

Here are some general practical tips for when you're making food for large numbers of people:

- prepare food in advance and freeze it, if you can, but ensure the food is properly defrosted before you use it
- wash your hands regularly with soap and warm water, using hand sanitisers if hand washing facilities are not available
- always wash fresh fruit and vegetables
- keep raw and ready-to-eat foods apart
- do not use food past its use-by date
- always read any cooking instructions and make sure food is properly cooked before you serve it
- ensure that food preparation areas are suitably cleaned and sanitised after use and wash any equipment you are using in hot soapy water
- keep food out of the fridge for the shortest time possible

Cooking temperatures

Standard advice is to cook food until it has reached a core temperature of 70°C for 2 minutes.

The other time and temperature combinations are:

- 60°C for 45 minutes
- 65°C for 10 minutes
- 75°C for 30 seconds
- 80°C for 6 seconds

Cooking food at the right temperature and for the correct length of time will ensure that any harmful bacteria are killed.

You can [check the temperature of a food, using a clean probe](#). Insert the probe so that the tip is in the centre of the food or the thickest part.

If you are donating or preparing food, it is important to make sure that those who receive the food know what is in it and how to prepare it. This is so it doesn't present a risk of making them ill.

Donating prepacked food products will make sure that the foods are properly labelled with instructions such as [use-by dates](#), [allergen information](#) and storage guidelines.

It's very important to store food properly to keep it safe. Storing food in sealed containers and at the correct temperature protects it from harmful bacteria, stops objects falling into it, and avoids cross-contamination with other ingredients.

Food that needs to be chilled, such as sandwiches should be left out of the fridge for the minimum possible time, and never for more than four hours.

After this time, any remaining food should be thrown away or [put back in the fridge](#). If you put the food back in the fridge, don't let it stand around at room temperature when you serve it again. It should be eaten as soon as possible.

Redistributing food and donating to food banks

Food cannot be sold, redistributed or consumed after the [use-by date](#). Food should not be donated to food banks after the use-by date. The only exception is if the food has gone through a safe [freezing](#) or [cooking process](#) before the use-by date has passed. In this instance the food should be appropriately re-labelled.

Food with a best before date can be legally sold, redistributed, and consumed after this date, if judged to be of sufficient quality to be donated and made available to be eaten. The food may not meet the quality expected by the consumer. [Waste and Resources Action Programme \(WRAP\) has visual check guidelines](#) for supplying food past the best before date.

For more information, food businesses should consult the [WRAP redistribution guide](#) and its [redistribution labelling checklist](#).

Businesses donating to food banks

Food businesses can redistribute foods past their best before dates.

When donating to food banks, businesses should carry out assessments on whether products past their best before dates can be redistributed. This should include a visual inspection, checking for freshness and any damage. In some instances, torn or damaged outer packaging may be acceptable if the integrity of the primary pack is maintained.

Food banks and redistributors should work with retailers and manufacturers to agree:

- the acceptable duration beyond best before dates for different products
- that the necessary checks have been carried out to ensure products are of sufficient quality and free from damage

Food banks and redistributors should perform their own visual inspections before food is used as a meal ingredient. This final check ensures that food past its best before date is of sufficient quality.

It is an offence for a person to sell or supply food which does not meet food safety requirements, or which is not of the 'nature, substance or quality' expected by the consumer. Food redistributors should have a system in place, based on [Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Point \(HACCP\)](#) principles, so that food is disposed of if it is no longer of the nature, substance or quality required.

Allergen guidance when cooking for your community or donating food

It is important to manage allergens effectively to ensure food is safe for customers with food allergies, intolerances or coeliac disease. If you are registered as a food business, you must follow the [allergen rules set out for food businesses](#), including:

- providing accurate allergen information for [different types of food](#), including prepacked, prepacked for direct sale, and non-prepacked (loose) foods
- handle and manage food allergens effectively in any preparation or kitchen, such as avoiding [cross contamination](#)

If your activity does not need to be registered as a food business, you don't have to provide information for consumers about allergens present in the food as ingredients. We recommend that the more information you can provide about allergens to customers, the better it is, so that people with food hypersensitivities (allergies, intolerances and coeliac disease) can make safe choices.

Having a conversation with the consumer about allergens is important to ensure that all necessary information is given to enable the safe preparation of food and meet allergen requirements, and for the consumer to make a safe and informed choice about what food to eat. See [our Best Practice Guidance for more information on having a conversation about allergen requirements](#).

Cooking for someone with a food allergy or intolerance can be worrying if you're not used to doing it. You can plan a safe meal by:

- asking what they can and can't eat
- making sure you keep allergens separate from other foods to avoid cross-contamination
- double-checking the ingredients lists on prepacked foods for allergen information
- checking the ingredients with the person who provided the food, if it was donated
- avoiding adding toppings or garnishes to dishes which might otherwise appear allergen-free
- cleaning work surfaces and equipment thoroughly to remove traces of anything you might have cooked before.

There are often good substitutes available for ingredients that someone may need to avoid. Don't hesitate to ask for help and suggestions for ingredients from those with a food allergy that you are cooking for.

Download our [allergy and intolerance sign](#) to display on your site for the consumer.

Managers can use and share sections of our [allergen checklist](#) with staff to ensure food allergy best-practice.

Staff and volunteers can complete our free [food allergy training](#).

Download our [allergy poster](#) to display on your site for your staff. It is also available in:

- [Welsh](#)
- [Bengali \(?????\)](#)
- [Cantonese \(??\)](#)
- [Punjabi \(???????\)](#)
- [Urdu \(????\)](#)

Food that needs extra care

Foods that pose a food safety risk to the consumer and/or do not meet legal labelling requirements should not be distributed.

Some foods need extra care, such as eggs.

In order to maintain eggs in optimum condition, guidance set out by [the British Lion](#) (an egg safety scheme) recommends eggs are:

- stored at an even temperature and below 20° in their outer boxes or packs
- stored in a dry place away from strong smelling foods and possible contaminants
- not stored or displayed near to heat sources such as fridge motors and fan heaters or in direct sunlight
- kept away from pre-cooked or raw foods
- handled in a way to minimise damage

Once the eggs have reached the consumer, the eggs should be stored in a cool, dry place. Ideally, in the fridge.

Other foods that require extra care include:

- rice
- pulses
- shellfish
- fish

If you provide any of these foods, consult the "[foods which need extra care](#)" section from the [Safer Food Better Business \(SFBB\) pack](#). Ready to eat foods usually come with Use By dates so need more care. They can become contaminated with pathogens like listeria, which can cause very serious illness or be fatal. For further information, consult [our listeria page](#) to help reduce the risk.

You may wish to be aware that some people are at increased risk of [food poisoning](#). These can include young children, pregnant women, older people and people with an underlying health condition. 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. Take extra care with serving foods to people in these groups and when serving these foods.

Meal containers

If you wish to provide food in containers, it is important to select appropriate food grade packaging. This is packaging intended for multiple uses, such as Tupperware or takeaway boxes. This will make sure that the transported food is safe and its quality is maintained. For example, packaging materials may be required to be liquid repellent to prevent leaks, or to stop paper becoming soaked through. Without this type of packaging, chemical contaminants or germs could transfer onto the food. Well-fitting lids will also minimise any hygiene or spillage risks.

It is safe to re-use glass and plastic containers, as long as they are free from chips and cracks. Make sure containers are thoroughly cleaned to prevent cross-contamination with germs, allergens and physical contaminants. If they are dishwasher safe, a dishwasher is preferable for cleaning due to the high temperature it reaches. Containers should be washed thoroughly in hot, soapy water if a dishwasher is unavailable.

Transporting food safely

Guidance for if you transport food to the consumer.

Food must be delivered to consumers safe and fit to eat. You must ensure:

- food is transported in packaging or containers that prevent contamination
- chilled and frozen foods are delivered to consumers in a way that ensures that they do not become unsafe or unfit to eat (for example, by using cool bags and boxes, or refrigerated vans)
- raw and ready-to-eat foods are kept separately

Follow our [food safety for food delivery](#) guidance for more information.

If an allergen-free meal has been requested, it should be clear when delivered which container it is in. You can use stickers or a note on the container to label each meal. Care should be taken to avoid cross contamination during transit and the consumer should be informed if this is a risk.

See [our Best Practice Guidance for allergen information on Distance Selling and Pre-Ordering](#).