

# Food Safety at Parties

A party is great fun. Whether it's to celebrate a special occasion, a community event, or a religious observance such as Christmas, it's a time when we gather together with the people we care about. The last thing we want is for it to end with our guests getting sick with food poisoning. Unfortunately, this is too often what happens.

## Why does food poisoning occur more often at large gatherings?

The average home kitchen is really not designed for cooking for large numbers of people. Work surfaces, stoves and fridges are intended to cater for normal cooking needs of a family, not for preparing large amounts of food.

Guests often bring a plate, which means the food can be out of the fridge for several hours, enough time for any bacteria in it to multiply.

To avoid a last minute rush and being too exhausted to enjoy the party, most people start preparing food well ahead of the event. That's fine, and some non-perishable items such as Christmas cake can be prepared weeks ahead. Other foods, such as casseroles or sausage rolls, can be cooked in advance but need to be carefully prepared and then chilled or frozen quickly.

## Don't be a goose... avoid temperature abuse

Temperature abuse is the major cause of food-borne illness at parties and functions. Remember to minimise the time food stays in the temperature danger zone (5°C - 60°C) by:

- Keeping hot food steaming hot – Use the top of the stove or an oven turned down to just below 100°C. If you want to serve hot food at less than 60°C, that's okay provided that it doesn't stay at that temperature for more than four hours.
- Keeping cold food cold. If you prepare ahead of time, make sure that the fridge is still operating at or below 5°C – even after you've loaded in all that extra food.
- Cooling quickly – Do not allow food to cool on the bench. Once the steam stops rising, cover the food and put it immediately in the fridge. You want it to cool as quickly as possible so that spores, which can survive cooking, don't germinate.
- Hastening the cooling process of any hot food by pre-cooling it in its container in a sink of iced or cold water or putting it into shallow containers. Chill or freeze the food in those shallow containers (covered). Deep containers can take days for the centre of the food to reach 5°C.
- Thawing any frozen food correctly in the fridge or microwave either the day before or on the day of the party.
- Reheating food quickly on top of the stove, in the oven or in a microwave.

## The Fridge

Domestic fridges are not very large and an overcrowded fridge or freezer does not allow the cold air to circulate freely around the food, causing food to be inadequately frozen or chilled. When a fridge is overloaded, it has to work overtime to keep food cool and if the weather is hot, the temperature inside it will rise.

You should have a fridge thermometer inside the fridge to check that it is operating at the correct temperature (less than 5°C). At these temperatures most food poisoning bacteria will multiply very slowly and the food will remain safe for longer. Check your fridge temperatures first thing in the morning after the food has had a chance to cool and adjust the controls to lower the temperature if necessary.

For a large event, you might decide to hire a refrigerator or mobile coolroom, to increase your cool storage capacity.

## Loading the fridge

Make sure that raw meat and poultry can't contaminate ready-to-eat food. Raw food can contain food poisoning bacteria. This may not be a problem if the food is cooked before it is eaten. However, if these bacteria get onto ready-to-eat food, such as salads, they can cause food poisoning.

You inevitably will run out of space to allow you to do this properly, particularly if your guests are also bringing food which needs to be refrigerated until you are ready to eat, so what should you do?

## What can be taken out of the fridge?

- Take out the drinks. Most drinks can't make you sick if they are inadequately cooled. You can fill the laundry sink and insulated containers or buckets with ice to keep all the drinks chilled.
- Whole fruit can survive in the fruit bowl or cupboard, as can many whole raw vegetables. Ground coffee can also be removed for a while without losing its flavour.
- Jars of pickles, chutneys and bottled sauces that have vinegar on the label can be removed they won't be a problem outside the fridge for a couple of days.
- If you still don't have enough room, make sure the things that are to be eaten later are in the fridge and leave out the things you will eat first – remember they can stay out of the fridge for up to four hours in total.

## What can't be taken out of the fridge?

- Cooked meats, deli meats, pates, etc.;
- Salads – especially cooked vegetable, pasta or rice salads (whether they contain meat or poultry or not);
- Seafood;
- Dips and other ready-to-eat foods;
- Cream, egg and custard based desserts;
- Any dish containing raw or minimally cooked eggs, such as homemade mayonnaise or sauces.

These foods should be left in the fridge until you are ready to eat them.

## Preparing and cooking the food

Because of the risks inherent in catering for a large group, you need to be even more careful than usual about preparing the food to prevent any bacteria being introduced by cross contamination.

- Wash your hands before you start preparing food and between raw and ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash chopping boards, knives and anything else which will come into contact with the food before you start preparation and between preparing raw and ready-to-eat foods.
- Cook poultry, minced meats, sausages and other pre-prepared meats until well done, right through to the centre. No pink should be left visible. Steaks and other solid pieces of meat can be cooked to taste.
- Don't prepare food if you're feeling unwell or have gastroenteritis.
- Keep salads, pates, cheese, dips and other perishable products in the fridge or cooler until needed. It's a good idea to divide nibbles into smaller serves and replace them during the day to reduce the amount of bacteria that can grow. Don't mix fresh top-ups with food that have been outside for some time. Low risk foods, e.g. nuts, crisps, crackers, etc. can be topped up.

## Cooking turkey

- Turkeys are quite big, and can cause problems if you don't have a plan. Before buying a huge frozen turkey, read the label. Big turkeys take several days to defrost in the fridge and many hours to cook properly, so think whether you really need a whole, big one.
- Other options would be to purchase a part turkey, such as a breast or turkey roll – much easier to defrost and cook to perfection.
- If you still opt for the whole turkey and cannot source a fresh bird, ask your butcher or supplier to defrost the turkey in their cool room so you can pick it up in time for Christmas and refrigerate.

- Whether a full turkey or turkey roll, the meat must be cooked all the way through. Use a meat thermometer to check that the temperature in the thickest part reaches 75°C.
- Because stuffing slows down cooking and cooling, it is best cooked separately.

## Bringing a plate or taking home leftovers

- Use insulated containers with lots of ice-bricks, gel packs etc to keep the food chilled.
- Chill the food well before taking it out of the fridge to pack. Don't pack food if it has just been cooked and is still warm.
- Cover all ready-to-eat food securely.
- Put meat into a cooler when travelling. Meat juices can easily leak onto pre-prepared foods, so package with this in mind. Place the meat on the bottom of the cooler away from ready-to-eat food.
- If you want to bring home any leftovers, ask your hosts to put your ice-bricks or gel packs into the freezer during the party so that you can transport the leftovers home safely. Put leftovers into the fridge as soon as you get home.

## And for safety's sake remember the 7 key tips

- Keep hot food steaming hot
- Keep cold food refrigerated
- Cook food properly
- Separate raw and cooked foods
- Keep kitchen and utensils clean
- Wash hands with soap and dry thoroughly
- Never prepare food if you are feeling unwell or have gastroenteritis

## Need more information?

For more information, please go to [www.health.act.gov.au](http://www.health.act.gov.au) or contact the Health Protection Service on [hps@act.gov.au](mailto:hps@act.gov.au) or (02) 5124 9700.

## Acknowledgement

This information has been adapted from information on the Food Safety Information Council website in 2014: [www.foodsafety.asn.au](http://www.foodsafety.asn.au).



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