Food Safety

What does food safety mean?

Keeping foods and drinks free of bacteria, moulds and parasites that cause diseases.

Why is food safety important?

Bacteria and other germs can contaminate food and water and cause food poisoning. This can result in problems such as cholera or typhoid. Throughout the world, food poisoning causes deaths and sickness, affecting every part of the population – young, old, rich and poor. Taking care of food can also help to keep food fresher for longer, reducing waste.

How does food become infected/contaminated?

- From soil/water where the foods were grown;
- From handling during production or selling;
- From handling before eating;
- From flies, rats, pests or contaminated air or water;
- By cross-contamination – transfer of bacteria etc. from one contaminated food to another (e.g. via hands or flies).

What are the effects of food poisoning?

The most common symptoms are nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhoea and fever.

The symptoms start between 1–36 hours after eating the problem food or meal. The results can last just a few hours or days.

Resulting effects on nutrition and hydration (amount of water in the body) can include death – particularly in the young, the sick or the elderly.

Mutton stew

How can you tell if a food is contaminated?

You cannot tell generally by looking at a food if it could cause food poisoning. Special laboratory tests would be needed.

Only in extreme cases can you detect the problem, e.g. mould on a food, bad smell, slimy texture, change in colour.

Just because a food looks, smells or even tastes all right, you cannot assume it is safe.

Preventing food poisoning

The best way to keep yourself, family and friends healthy and free of food poisoning is to follow some basic food safety guidelines to take care of your food.

1. Wash hands before eating or touching any food – it is easy to touch something such as a wall or table that is contaminated, and so get bacteria on your hands.
2. Wash hands after visiting the toilet or dealing with animals – toilets and most animals

generally contain a lot of bacteria.

3. Wash hands well – just throwing a bit of water on your hands will not get rid of bacteria. Ideally use soap and running water (from a container if no tap) and rub hands thoroughly for at least 30 seconds.

4. Keep food areas clean – including surfaces, cupboards and equipment.

5. Keep food away from chemicals such as bleach and cleaning agents. Don't reuse old containers to store food or water.

6. Keep food covered and sealed when being stored.

7. Wash all fruits and vegetables before use – even if they are going to be cooked.

8. Try to use safe water for cooking and washing foods.

9. Avoid coughing or sneezing near food.

10. If you have a sore or a cut on your hands, cover it well with a clean dressing before touching food.

11. Cover food to keep insects such as flies and ants away.

12. Keep all animals away from food.

13. Cook foods thoroughly – make sure they are hot and cooked all the way through.

Food storage

Most food has a small number of bacteria on or in it. However this number will not be enough to cause sickness. But given the right conditions, the bacteria can increase, until there are enough to cause a problem.

Bacteria and moulds like warmth, damp, a good supply of food, and time.

- Don't store foods for too long after cooking/preparation. Eat food as soon as it is made if possible.
- Store foods in cold conditions, e.g. in the fridge, if you need to store them.
- Don't keep food warm – if you need to keep it, first cool it, and then reheat it thoroughly before you eat it.

For places without refrigerators, you can use cool boxes with ice or keep food out of direct sunlight. Unfortunately, the food will not keep as long if it is not refrigerated.

Raw foods

When dealing with foods that are not going to be cooked, more care should be taken to wash and clean them thoroughly using safe water.

Meat and fish

Raw meat, chicken, turkey, fish and shellfish should be handled with extra care, as they are very likely to contain bacteria. They should be thoroughly cooked before eating. It is important to make sure that you do not contaminate cooked/other foods – wash hands after touching, wash all surfaces and equipment that touched the raw meat/fish.

Use-by date

Many packaged foods have a use-by or sell-by date on them, even canned or frozen foods. Always check labels before buying and make sure you use the packaged food by the date marked. After this date, the food is likely to be unsafe.