**FOOD SAFETY**

As a professional carer, it is important to pay close attention to food safety. If you are preparing meals for your clients and you do not follow the correct guidelines, you could find yourself in trouble. Here, we hope to give you a little guidance on preparing food safely.

**The rules:**

The **Food Safety Act 1990 (FSA)** is a legal framework which regulates the safety and quality of food and food products sold or served in the UK, to ensure they are fit for human consumption. FSA regulations cover the safety, quality, storage, preparation and labelling of foods. Failing to comply with FSA guidelines in a professional capacity is a criminal offence, for which you may be prosecuted.

There are a number of simple measures you can implement to ensure good food safety practice. By following the steps outlined below, you will significantly reduce the risk of illness or infection.

Hundreds of people each year report illnesses resulting from food poisoning, both in the home and eating out, and many more cases go unreported. Often, food-related gastric illnesses are short-lived, as vomiting and diarrhoea clear out the bad bacteria from the body. However, in some cases, food poisoning may lead to medium and long-term health conditions, and in some cases can be fatal.

That makes getting the following right, all the more important.

**Keeping cooking areas clean**

* Wash your hands with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds, according to the hand hygiene code of practice. Follow these steps for BOTH hands, always washing before and after touching food.
* Wash any chopping boards, dishes, cutlery and worktops with hot soapy water. Repeat after working with each food group to prevent cross-contamination.
* Rinse any fruits, salads and vegetables.
* Wipe clean the tops of canned goods before opening.

**Separate food**

* Separate all raw foods from one another, as bacteria can easily cross-contaminate.
* Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs away from all other foods.
* Ensure these foods are kept in separate shopping bags and stored in different sections of the fridge.
* Never reuse any marinades used on raw foods, unless first brought to the boil.
* Use a designated cutting board/plate for raw meats, and separate boards for vegetables and other products.

**Cooking food**

To kill germs and bacteria, food must be heated through to the correct temperature. Always cook meats to the following temperatures:

* **Beef, pork and lamb:** over 145°F/60°C
* **Fish:** over 145°F/60°C
* **Ground meats (such as beef, pork or lamb):** over 160°F/70°C
* **Chicken, turkey and duck:** over 165°F/75°C

Always use a food thermometer to ensure food has reached its safe temperature. You cannot always tell by looking. Not all clients will have a food thermometer, so we ask that you follow instructions on packaging and if cooking meat check for clear running juices.

**Chilling food**

* Put all foods intended for cold storage into the refrigerator right away.
* Always follow the 2-hour rule: put food in the fridge or freezer within 2 hours of cooking or purchasing. Do this within 1 hour if it is hotter than 90°F/30°C outside.
* Never thaw food at room temperature. Where possible, defrost food in the refrigerator in advance.
* Marinate all food in the refrigerator.

**Defrosting food**

Never defrost foods at room temperature. This includes leaving food to defrost on kitchen worktops or other surfaces.

There are several safe ways to defrost food, such as:

* **In the refrigerator:** this is the safest way to defrost food. When defrosted in the fridge, foods do not pass through the temperature ‘danger zone’ (between 40-140°F/6-60°C), within which bacteria grow and multiply most comfortably. Food for defrosting should be placed on a plate and confined to the lower shelves of the fridge.

*\*\*\*Depending on the size of the food, this can be a long process, so always plan ahead when defrosting in the fridge. Move food from the freezer to the fridge a day prior to its intended use.\*\*\**

* **In a microwave oven:** when short on time, this is a useful defrosting method. Defrosting by microwave is only recommended for foods that will be cooked directly after defrosting. Be aware that this method may change a food’s evenness and consistency.
* **While cooking:**some foods can be cooked from frozen, such as hamburger patties, frozen vegetables and frozen pastry. Always check the food’s internal temperature before serving.
* **With water:** defrosting food under cold running water is acceptable but is not the safest method. Make sure the sink is sanitised and the food is completely submerged under running water of 60°F/20°C or lower. Should you wish to conserve water, place the food in waterproof, leakproof packaging and fill with very cold water. Refresh the water every 30 minutes. This method is only acceptable if the food can be defrosted within 2 hours.

**Storing food in the refrigerator**

* Ensure the fridge is kept below 5°C.
* Ready-to-eat foods should be stored at the top of the fridge.
* Raw meat, poultry, and fish should be stored on the bottom shelf, and kept in sealed containers to keep them from touching other foods.
* Most foods have a ‘use by’ date. Food is generally unsafe to eat after this date.
* Some foods also have a ‘best before’ date. Food beyond this date may be of poorer quality but may still be safe to eat.
* Cooldown leftovers as quickly as possible and eat within two days (if not frozen). Keep leftovers covered, or in a sealed container.
* Avoid putting open tin cans containing leftover food in the fridge. Instead, transfer canned food into a separate sealed container.

**Freezing food**

Many foods are freezer friendly, but remember that food texture may change once defrosted. Foods with a high water-content (such as strawberries and tomatoes) will usually go soft or have a very different texture, but are still generally fine to cook with. To freeze, place food in an airtight container or wrap tightly in freezer bags or cling film before placing in the freezer. Failing to do this will cause cold air to dry out the food (commonly known as ‘freezer burn’).

Never refreeze any fish or raw meat of any kind once defrosted. You can refreeze cooked meat and fish once, providing they have cooled before being placed in the freezer.

If in doubt, do not refreeze.

**Reusing shopping bags**

With more people using bags for life, and reusing single-use plastic bags, it is important to reduce the risk of bacteria spreading from raw meats to ready-to-eat foods. You can prevent cross-contamination by:

* Packing raw foods and ready-to-eat foods in separate bags.
* Keeping 1 or 2 reusable bags for raw foods only. Never use these bags for ready-to-eat foods.
* Checking bags for spillages, such as raw meat juices or soil, after every use.
* Wiping out/washing bags after each shopping trip with warm salty water, or disposing of after use.
* Never reuse zip-lock or freezer bags.

In the event of spillage, dispose of any soiled plastic bags (single-use or bags for life).

**In summary**

By following the basic guidelines above, you will be able to assure yourself that you have done everything you can to prepare food safely. However, if you want to read more, check out the following links:

* [**https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-store-food-and-leftovers/**](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/how-to-store-food-and-leftovers/)
* [**https://www.food.gov.uk/food-safety**](https://www.food.gov.uk/food-safety)
* [**https://www.gov.uk/food-safety-your-responsibilities/food-hygiene**](https://www.gov.uk/food-safety-your-responsibilities/food-hygiene)