

Food Advice Catering for Charity Events

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Catering events are a good way of raising funds or providing social activities for those in need and vulnerable groups, but worries about food poisoning mean that some voluntary, charitable and other providers are cutting back on these activities. However, by taking some simple steps, it should be possible to hold charity catering events which are both safe and enjoyable.

The good news is that many of the foods traditionally served or sold at charity events are inherently fairly safe. This may be because they are low risk foods, or because the steps needed to prevent food poisoning are simple and easy to achieve.

Unfortunately food poisoning is not the only concern when catering, especially for children. Food allergies, particularly to peanuts, can lead to severe adverse reactions and even death in rare circumstances. People with these allergies tend to be aware of the steps they should take to stay safe, but some simple precautions to prevent “cross contamination” should be taken to ensure the safety of any food.

High Risk Foods

“High risk” foods are those foods in which food poisoning bacteria can grow, and which are not going to be treated again to make them safe.

High risk foods include ready to eat meat, fish and dairy products. They can also include other foods such as vegetarian pates and other similar protein rich foods.

Raw meat and poultry is not generally regarded as “high risk”, as thorough cooking should kill any bacteria etc and make them safe. However, they need to be handled with care to make sure that bacteria from raw meat and poultry is not spread around the kitchen and onto other foods – and they need to be properly cooked to make sure they are safe.

If you manage the risks these foods can present, parties and buffets should be safe as well as enjoyable

Managing foods safely

Some simple rules should be followed to help ensure the safety of any catering function:-

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1 **Plan the function**

- Be realistic about what you can achieve and keep it simple – try to limit the range of food to limit the confusion, or share the work out so that each person can concentrate on what they are doing.
- Try to pre-plan, so that shopping can be done as needed with a minimum of storage time, and preparation can be done ahead of time
- Think about where you will get the food and equipment to prevent last minute panics, and if possible check them out to make sure they are reputable.
- Make sure you will have enough space to do what you want – accidents are more likely when you are struggling to cope in a small space.
- Don't buy food from sources you are unsure of – only buy from reputable suppliers

2. **Plan the equipment you need**

- Think about the equipment needed, so that there is enough to prepare and store the amounts of food involved. You may need to hire or borrow equipment, for example by asking volunteers to bring plates and cutlery
- Make sure there is enough fridge space and that these are switched on so that they are cold when needed. If necessary, use cold boxes or ice blocks, or freeze foods to keep them cool or to help keep other foods cool. Put low risk foods and drinks in a cool place or in buckets of ice if short of fridge space
- Make sure there is enough equipment to cook everything properly – especially meat. If short on cookers, consider borrowing extra microwave cookers to cook vegetables, reheat sauces etc, and they can also be used to finish cooking things in an emergency

3 **Plan the food you will serve**

- Avoid high risk foods if they are going to be left out of refrigeration for more than 4 hours (you can use cold boxes or ice blocks, or freeze some foods to keep them cool or to help keep other foods cool if fridge space is limited)
- Choose lower risk options if possible for buffets – some meat, fish and dairy foods do not support bacterial growth. These tend to be foods that are preserved using salt, sugar, vinegar or have low moisture levels etc – for example cheddar cheese or salami
- Foods enclosed in pastry help protect the contents from contamination after cooking – pies and sausage rolls can be left out of the fridge in a cool place for a few hours providing they have been thoroughly cooked beforehand.
- There are some excellent shop-bought alternatives available that can significantly reduce the work needed and help ensure high standards
- Make sure any poultry or meats are well cooked, by cooking to at least 63°C until the juices run clear. If reheating meat, do so thoroughly and not just by placing in hot gravy (thermometers and food probes can be bought in supermarkets or cooking equipment shops)

4 Handle foods safely

- Handling raw meat and poultry can lead to “cross contamination”, where bacteria from the meat etc get onto hands, work surfaces, cleaning cloths etc. Make sure hands and anything that has touched raw meat or poultry are cleaned thoroughly and disinfected (using a suitable surface disinfectant) where appropriate – or plan to use just cooked meats etc and re-heat.
- Handling food can lead to contamination, so try to handle food as little as possible once it is cooked and ready to eat. Tongs etc may help to minimise risks. Many people wear gloves to protect food, but it is important to remember that these can get as dirty as hands.
- Have some means of washing hands and equipment when cooking or serving - either a nearby sink or wash hand basin, or some bowls, soap, towel and some kind of water supply (e.g. a flask of hot water). Anti-bacterial soap and washing up liquid is a good idea.
- Sandwiches are particularly risky as they can contain high risk foods, and they are handled quite a bit when being made and can be left on display for long periods of time. Try choosing lower risk contents such as jams and spreads, Cheddar cheese and pickle etc and keep them simple to minimise handling.

5 Wrapping foods

- Once foods are made, it is important to protect them from contamination. Clean plastic boxes are ideal, but cling film and aluminium foil can also be used to cover many foods providing care is taken
- Only let **cling film** touch high-fat foods when the packaging says the cling film is suitable for this. High-fat foods include some cheeses, raw meats with a layer of fat, fried meats, pies and pastries, and cakes with butter icing or chocolate coatings.
- **Kitchen foil**, which is made from aluminium, can be useful for wrapping and covering foods. But its best not to use foil or containers made from aluminium to store foods that are highly acidic, such as tomatoes, rhubarb, cabbage and many soft fruits. This is because aluminium can affect the taste of these sorts of food, especially if they are stored in aluminium containers for a long time.

6 Enjoy the party!

- Planning ahead, keeping it simple and sharing out the work should help the organisers as well as the participants enjoy the party.

If you follow these simple guidelines, your catering function or event should be safe as well as enjoyable for those people that attend.

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Getting further advice

There is plenty of information and advice available to help you ensure that your party will be safe – in fact, the problem is that there can be too much information. The best sources of information and expertise are as follows

- If planning a number of parties and events, it may be a good investment to get volunteers trained. Torfaen Adult Education offer low cost, one day Basic Food Hygiene Courses that will cover the knowledge needed to ensure safe catering
- The Food, Health and Safety Enforcement team can offer information and advice, and have leaflets available on a range of topics
- The Food Standards Agency website at www.foodstandards.gov.uk offers an excellent range of advice on food safety and nutrition.

Care and common sense are all that are needed to make sure that parties and other events are safe as well as fun. By following the simple rules above, they will hopefully be fun for those organising the function as well.