



Catering advice for charity and community groups providing food

I'm making food for lots of people at a fundraising event. What general safety advice can you give me?

When you're making food for large numbers of people, it's important to keep food safe. Here are some general practical tips:

- Plan ahead - if you can prepare food in advance and freeze it, this should make things easier later but do ensure it is properly defrosted when you come to use it.
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and 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.
- Keep food out of the fridge for the shortest time possible.
- Always read any cooking instructions and make sure food is properly cooked before you serve it. Even if people are waiting to eat, don't reduce cooking times.
- Ensure that food preparation areas are suitably cleaned and sanitised after use and wash any equipment you are using in hot soapy water.

Which people are particularly vulnerable and which foods should I take care with?

Vulnerable persons are those at a higher risk of food poisoning. These are people over 65 years of age, pregnant women, children under 5 and those with certain long-term medical conditions.

Some foods such as raw milk, raw shellfish, soft cheeses, pâté, foods containing raw egg and cooked sliced meats are more likely to cause food poisoning than others.

What are the new requirements for allergens and do they apply to community and charity events?

If you are a charity or community food operation which is not required to be registered as a food business, you don't have to provide information for consumers about allergens present in the food as ingredients. However, we recommend that you or anyone else managing charity operations do consider the risks. This would be good practice.

I'm holding a buffet. How long should I leave the food out?

If you are preparing a buffet, be aware that most food needing to be chilled, such as sandwich fillings, should be left out of the fridge for the shortest time possible and not more than four hours. After this time, any remaining food should be thrown away or put back in the fridge but if you do put the food back in the fridge don't let it stand around at room temperature if you serve it again.

How do volunteers make, transport and store cakes safely?

At home, people making cakes should follow these general tips:

- always wash your hands before preparing food
- make sure that surfaces, bowls, utensils, and any other equipment is clean
- don't use raw eggs in anything that won't be thoroughly cooked, such as icing or mousse
- keep cheesecakes and any cakes or desserts containing fresh cream in the fridge

store cakes in a clean, sealable container, away from raw foods. On the day, people bringing in cakes from home or running the stall should follow these tips:

- transport cakes in a clean, sealable container
- make sure that cheesecake and any cakes or desserts containing fresh cream are left out of the fridge for the shortest time possible, ideally not longer than four hours.
- when handling cakes use tongs or a cake slice instead

How long can cakes be kept safely?

Storing wedding cake, Christmas cake and other baked goods

It is difficult to assess the storage time of cakes and other baked goods; much will depend on the recipe as this will influence the chances of any mould growth, which would be the major cause of concern. Cakes and baked goods with high sugar content will keep for longer as this will delay any mould growth. Keeping cakes and baked goods in an airtight container is also important to prevent mould growth through absorption of moisture from the atmosphere. Storing the cake in the fridge will mean it will last for longer, but may affect its quality. It is worth consulting reputable cooking books and web sites as these may give some additional tips for storage.

Storing cakes with cream and other high moisture additions

If you add any high moisture additions after baking (e.g. cream) then the cake should not be left at room temperature but must be stored chilled (in the fridge) and eaten within the shelf-life of the added product.

However, there are some types of icing such as ganache and butter cream that can be stored without refrigeration because of the high sugar content and relatively low water content, which should prevent growth of harmful bugs. It is still possible that moulds and other spoilage organisms could grow so it's best to store the products somewhere cool and dry. The FSA advises that you check the guidelines for storage of the particular icing product you will be using and/or a reputable recipe. So inclusion of fresh cream would mean you should keep product in the fridge, but butter icing etc. should be ambient stable due to the high sugar content.

(This is an extract – I have omitted the sections that don't apply to RMVC activities (Steve Richardson))