
Food safety when eating out

Restaurants, cafes and takeaway food outlets have a responsibility to serve food that is safe to eat. However, there are some basic measures you can take that will minimise the risk of food poisoning when eating out.

The types of food that can make you sick

Many different types of food can make you sick. Food that contains dangerous bacteria or viruses may not look, smell or taste any different from food that is safe. Food-poisoning bacteria are either in the food to begin with or are transferred to the food during storage, preparation, cooking or serving.

High-risk foods

Food-poisoning bacteria can grow and multiply on some types of food more easily than others. These high-risk foods include:

- Meat
- Poultry such as chicken and turkey
- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Smallgoods such as salami and ham
- Seafood
- Cooked rice
- Cooked pasta
- Prepared salads such as coleslaw, pasta salads and rice salads
- Prepared fruit salads.

When eating out, pay special attention to how these high-risk foods are prepared, cooked, stored and served.

Choosing where to eat

When you decide to eat in a restaurant or buy takeaway food, consider these questions:

- Are staff members using separate utensils and equipment for handling raw and cooked foods?
- Are staff members using clean cloths to wipe surfaces?
- Are raw and cooked foods well separated?
- Are the toilets clean?
- Is the shop or restaurant generally clean?

Dirty conditions in the public areas of a shop or restaurant can be a clue that things may be worse in the kitchen or behind the scenes where customers don't go.

Hints for buying food

When buying food, remember:

- Hot food should be served steaming hot (60 °C and above). Avoid eating lukewarm food.

- Cold food should be displayed on ice or in a refrigerated cabinet and should feel cold when you eat it (5 °C or less).
- Pre-made sandwiches and rolls that contain perishable ingredients, such as meat, fish, chicken, egg and cheese, should be stored in a refrigerated cabinet or kept at room temperature for less than four hours.
- Don't buy 'tired-looking' food that looks like it has been sitting at room temperature for a long time.
- Minced meat, hamburgers, rolled or stuffed roasts and chicken must be cooked right through – there should be no pink meat. Do not eat undercooked meats. Return them for further cooking.
- Steak, chops and whole cuts of red meat can be cooked to your preference.
- Takeaway food should be served in appropriate takeaway containers and at the appropriate temperature.

What to look for at buffets or self-service restaurants

Check that:

- Food to be eaten hot is stored in hot food display cabinets or over burners at 60 °C and above.
- Cold food is displayed on ice or in refrigerated cabinets at 5 °C or less.
- Each food dish has its own serving utensils.
- Fresh food is replenished regularly.
- Foods are covered by some type of guard or cover.
- Plates and cutlery are clean and dry.

Taking food home

When you have takeaway food, either eat it within a few hours or take it home and put it in the fridge immediately. Make sure that it is eaten within a couple of days. Throw out any high-risk food that has been left in the temperature danger zone of between 5 °C and 60 °C for more than four hours.

Doggy bags

Doggy bags are not the same as normal takeaway foods. Takeaway food is intended to be eaten away from the premises, and is served by the food business at the appropriate temperature and in suitable takeaway containers.

The term 'doggy bag' developed when food left uneaten at a restaurant was taken home for the family pet. However, many customers take doggy bags home and consume that food themselves later.

There are no laws that prevent restaurants and cafes from giving customers doggy bags. However, uneaten food taken from a restaurant or cafe in a doggy bag may become unsafe for human consumption. Foods taken home in doggy bags can be exposed to a number of hazards:

- High-risk food left in the temperature danger zone (between 5 °C and 60 °C), which can have increased levels of food-poisoning bacteria
- Incorrect handling by the consumer, which can contaminate the food with food-poisoning bacteria
- Not reheating the food adequately.

Where to get help

- Your local council health department
- The Department of Health Food Safety Hotline Tel. 1300 364 352, email: foodsafety@health.vic.gov.au

Things to remember

- If the staff don't look after themselves and their premises, they're unlikely to look after your food very well.
- Hot food should be served hot at 60 °C and above, and cold food should be served cold at 5 °C or less.
- If you are in any doubt about the safety of food, don't eat it.
- If you have serious concerns with the way food is handled, stored, prepared or cooked by a restaurant, cafe or takeaway shop, contact the local council's health department.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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