

Bohse & Associates

“DISHING IT OUT” THE BOHSE WAY:

Food Handling Considerations

Handling food safely entails many elements such as ensuring foods are thawed, cooked, cooled, frozen, reheated, held and served at proper temperatures, and are protected from outside contamination. In addition, the quality and nutritional value of the food served is influenced by the length of time foods are kept warm prior to service.

Inadequate food temperature controls are common factors contributing to food borne illness. A critical element in maintaining food safety is to cook foods to appropriate temperatures and to keep perishable food products (or potentially hazardous foods) out of the temperature danger zone (between 41°F and 135°F – 2003 Supplement to the 2001 Food Code revised hot holding temperature from 140°F to 135°F). Use a clean, sanitized and calibrated probe thermometer to check internal food temperatures.

Cooking

Foods are properly cooked when they are heated for a long enough time and at a high enough temperature to kill the harmful bacteria that cause food borne illness. If possible, avoid cooking foods more than one day ahead of time. Use a meat thermometer to make sure food is cooked throughout. A cooking temperature guide is available from U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food Safety and Inspection Service. <http://www.foodsafety.gov/~fsg/fscook.html>.

Cooling and Freezing

Set refrigerators at 40°F and freezers at 0°F and routinely check the appliance thermometer. Refrigerate foods quickly as cold temperatures keep most harmful bacteria from growing and multiplying. It is recommended to cool foods to the following internal temperatures: from 120° to 70° in less than 2 hours and from 70° to 45° in less than four hours (New York State Department of Health). Divide large amounts of leftovers into small, shallow containers to speed cooling. With poultry and other stuffed meats, remove the stuffing and refrigerate it in a separate container. Don't over pack the refrigerator or freezer. Cool air must circulate to cool foods down.

The process used to prepare frozen meals must meet local, state, and federal regulations. Some localities require the use of blast-chill/blast-freeze technology and equipment. Frozen meals produced by a non-USDA regulated facility often requires written authorization from the state agriculture department indicating that the process and facility meet with their guidelines for safety and quality.

Holding Hot Foods

Keep hot foods at 135° F or above by placing them from the oven directly to a steam table or other holding unit. Do not attempt to heat foods in a steam table or holding unit, as they are not designed to do that. Stir foods at frequent intervals to evenly distribute heat. Keep a cover on foods to help maintain temperatures. Never combine an old batch of food with a new batch. Check the temperature of the foods frequently with a probe thermometer. Don't rely solely on the thermostat gauges of the holding equipment. They may not accurately indicate the internal temperature of the food.

Holding Cold and Frozen Foods

Keep foods in cold-holding units (such as salads bars with ice), commercial refrigerated cases, refrigerators at 40° F or below, and freezers at or below 0°. Cover foods held in cold holding units to help maintain temperatures. Check the temperature of the foods frequently as noted above for hot foods. Frozen foods should maintain their frozen state at all times except when they are to be thawed and/or reheated.

Defrosting

Defrost foods in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or the microwave oven. Do not leave foods on a counter to defrost (or marinate) at room temperature.

Reheating

Bring sauces, soups and gravy to a boil when reheating. Heat frozen or chilled meals and other potentially hazardous foods thoroughly to 165°F.

Advance Preparation and Leftovers

Often extra portions are planned for the day's meal production so they may be chilled and/or frozen for future service. These meals should be cooled as noted above (or your local requirements) and packaged to prevent contamination, freezer burn and leakage. Food items that are actually "left over" may be handled as above provided they were not served, were protected from contamination, and were held at proper temperatures. However, such policies may vary depending on the operation and local health department regulations.

Program staff and consumers must be informed as to the proper handling of foods taken away or delivered to the home, following the cooling, holding, and reheating requirements outlined here. Depending on the population served, consumers may be discouraged from taking food from the premises due to safety and liability issues. State and local program requirements often dictate "taking food home" policies. In any case, educating consumers on safe food handling is imperative.

Packaging and Delivery

Food and other products such as utensils and dinnerware must be packaged and delivered in a manner that prevents contamination from dust, insects, and rodents. Likewise foods must be maintained at proper food temperatures. In order to retain maximum nutritional value and food quality, hot foods in particular should be delivered and served as soon as possible after preparation.

There are many food carrier and transport systems that can safely deliver cold, frozen, and hot food items and/or meals at proper temperatures within acceptable time frames (state and program requirements often range between two and three hours). These include rigid plastic, foam, or insulated fabric food carriers that may use supplemental heat and cold packs or electrical heating/cooling devices. Vans and trucks may be specially outfitted with refrigerated and heated compartments.

Resources

The Partnership for Food Safety Education's Fight BAC! ® Web site has many resources and links.

<http://www.fightbac.org/>

Model Food Code (Public Health Service, Food and Drug Administration)

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodcode.html>

For government-generated information on food safety for the food industry and food consumers at:

<http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/fs-toc.html>, www.FoodSafety.gov is the “gateway” to government food safety information.

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