

Understanding Prepared Dishes

Prepared dishes generally refer to foods which are made from one or more food ingredients and are processed (e.g. cutting, mixing, marinating, kneading, flavouring) and/or prepared (e.g. frying, roasting, boiling, steaming), and then prepared as either finished or semi-finished dishes. Many familiar food products, from soft-centred eggs to spicy crayfish, can be classified as prepared dishes and have long been available in the market.

Since quite a number of prepared dishes are stored refrigerated or frozen, it is important to ensure that the cold chain is well maintained during the whole storage and transportation process. The goal of the cold chain is to prevent prepared dishes from falling within the "Temperature Danger Zone" between 4°C and 60°C, which allows bacteria to grow rapidly. Also, the packaging of prepared dishes should include information such as storage conditions and cooking time, temperature and methods for consumers' easy reference. In Hong Kong, prepared dishes are subject to the food safety requirements as stipulated in the Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap. 132). Besides, under Section 54 of Cap. 132, all food available for sale in Hong Kong should be fit for human consumption, including prepared dishes.

Common food safety problems related to prepared dishes:

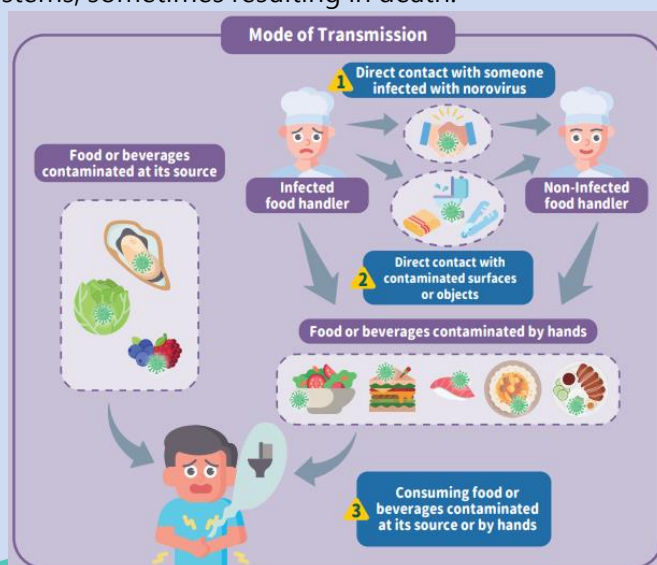
- Inadequate cooking or reheating**
 - Reheating precooked food means cooking again, not just warming up.
 - Always cook or reheat prepared dishes thoroughly until the core temperature reaches at least 75°C for 30 seconds to eliminate harmful microorganisms.
- Contamination during preparation**
 - Microbiological contamination is one of the most prominent food safety risks of prepared dishes, which have been subjected to various processing and handling.
 - Always use separate utensils and equipment for handling raw and cooked or ready-to-eat food to prevent cross-contamination during preparation.
 - Maintain proper personal hygiene, including frequent handwashing and avoiding food handling when unwell.
- Improper temperature and time control during transportation and storage**
 - Make sure that the cold chain is well maintained during the whole storage and transportation process of prepared dishes.
 - Prevent prepared dishes from falling within the "Temperature Danger Zone" between 4°C and 60°C, which allows various types of bacteria to grow rapidly, during all stages of storage and transportation.

Currently, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has implemented a risk-based surveillance system for food products available in Hong Kong, including prepared dishes. In 2023 to 2024, over 1,000 food samples that could be classified as prepared dishes were tested, with only one unsatisfactory sample of pre-packaged chilled crayfish due to possible contamination with *Listeria monocytogenes*. Test results of the remaining samples were satisfactory. The CFS has taken appropriate follow-up actions on the unsatisfactory sample.

Before purchasing, consumers should check expiration dates and the wholesomeness of the prepared dishes, and read nutrition labels to make healthier food choices. After purchasing, store prepared dishes according to the instructions on the packaging. Before consumption, process prepared dishes according to the instructions on the packaging, including cooking time, cooking temperature and cooking methods.

Norovirus in Food

Norovirus is a highly contagious pathogen. It is the leading cause of acute gastroenteritis worldwide. Norovirus is notoriously difficult to eliminate and can survive a wide range of temperatures from freezing point to 60°C, and endure chlorine-treated water at levels up to 10 ppm. Symptoms include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. While most people recover within a day or two, it can be severe for people of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, young children and those with weakened immune systems, sometimes resulting in death.



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The only known host of norovirus is humans; it is spread primarily through the faecal-oral route. It can also be transmitted from person to person via droplets of vomit. The key transmission routes of norovirus are:

1. Contaminated food: Consuming food contaminated at its source is a major risk. Shellfish like oysters and other bivalves can concentrate norovirus from polluted water. Besides, cross-contamination of ready-to-eat food by food handlers may occur, if they do not wash their hands after handling raw food, mobile phones, money, rubbish or using the toilet, especially when they are symptomatic.
2. Environmental contamination: Norovirus can survive on various surfaces like stainless steel, ceramic, countertops, etc. for a day or more, allowing transmission via contact with contaminated utensils or surfaces.
3. Dirty hands: Infected individuals can shed norovirus in their faeces and vomit, contaminating their hands. If they fail to wash their hands properly after using the toilet, they can spread norovirus to food and surfaces. Notably, alcohol-based hand sanitizers cannot substitute hand washing as they are ineffective against norovirus.

How to wash your hands



Prevention Strategies:

1. Cook food thoroughly: Ensure that shellfish are cooked to a higher core temperature of 90°C for 90 seconds, or is boiled at 100°C until shells open, continuing for 3 to 5 minutes.
2. Maintain good hand hygiene: Wash hands thoroughly with liquid soap and water for at least 20 seconds and ensure that liquid soap and paper towels are readily available for staff to use.
3. Avoid cross-contamination: Use separate utensils and cutting boards for raw and ready-to-eat foods, and regularly clean and sanitise food preparation areas.
4. Educate and monitor food handlers: Provide regular training on good hygiene practices and the risks associated with norovirus. Staff should understand the importance of adhering to good personal hygiene and proper food handling. Food handlers who exhibit symptoms of infection should refrain from handling food until they have been symptom-free for at least 48 hours.

Recruitment of the 8th-term Consumer Liaison Group Members

Thank you for your participation in the Consumer Liaison Group (CLG). It requires a joint effort from all stakeholders to ensure food safety. Your friends and family are also welcome to join the CLG. Please complete and return the attached membership form. It is also available for download from our website: https://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/committee/committee_clg_recruitment.html

For enquiries, please contact Mr AU YEUNG on 2381 6275. Please return the completed membership form to us by fax (2893 3547), email (clg@fehd.gov.hk) or post (Consumer Liaison Group, 4/F, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department Nam Cheong Offices and Vehicle Depot, 87 Yen Chow Street West, Kowloon).

(Note: Existing members need not reapply.)

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