Online Grocery Shopping and Delivery
Food Safety Advice for Food Businesses and Consumers

Introduction and scope

Online grocery shopping and delivery is growing in popularity as people find it more convenient to buy groceries through websites or mobile applications. As a result of this trend, numerous brick-and-mortar businesses, ranging from supermarket chains to small single-store operations, now offer online ordering and grocery delivery to their consumers. However, failing to observe Good Hygiene Practices when preparing, storing, and delivering grocery products might not only result in food safety issues, but also invite consumer complaints. It is critical for food businesses to ensure that all food products are handled properly throughout the entire delivery process, whether delivered by food premises staff or third-party agents.

> The term "groceries" in this set of guidelines refers to food items commonly sold in grocery shops, supermarkets or online shops, including pre-packaged and non-prepackaged foods. Some of these foods are perishable such as fresh fruits and vegetables, eggs, meats, poultry, seafood, dairy products, fruit juices, convenient meal-kits, and a variety of frozen food products.

This set of advice is intended for operators that offer online ordering and/or delivery of groceries including operators of grocery stores, supermarkets, online shops as well as third-party food delivery agents. It aims to assist the trade in implementing appropriate food safety measures in their operations to reduce the risk of foodborne diseases when providing grocery delivery services. While this is not a legal document and its use is voluntary, it reviews some essential parameters related to Good Hygiene Practices and recommends best practices that any food business operator (FBO) and third-party food delivery agent should consider in providing safe foods to consumers.

> This set of guidelines does not cover meals and beverages provided by food premises that are prepared for immediate consumption. For guidelines on delivery of ready-to-eat meals and beverages, please refer to "Takeaways and Meal Delivery – Food Safety Advice for Food Businesses and Consumers"(https://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/multimedia/multimedia_pub/files/5-takeaways.pdf).

Common Food Safety Problems related to Online Grocery Shopping and Delivery

1. **Improper time/temperature control**
   - No temperature control measures implemented for perishable food during delivery.
   - Heavy traffic, poor logistics, adverse weather or multiple orders exceeding the delivery capacity can lengthen the delivery time and result in failure to keep food at a safe temperature.

2. **Cross-contamination of food**
   - Food can become contaminated when transported in unclean vehicles or containers that have spillage, mould or dirt.
   - Delivery of food with non-food items, such as detergents, can lead to contamination if the chemicals spill or leak out of the containers, especially when not packaged or handled properly.

3. **Spoilage caused by physical damage**
   - Compression and abrasion during transit can damage some foods especially fruits and vegetables, making them more susceptible to bacterial and fungal spoilage.

4. **Lack of food information for consumers**
   - Not all FBOs provide food labels, including nutrition information and ingredient lists, for prepackaged food on their websites. This may pose health and safety concerns for consumers, especially for those with allergies or dietary restrictions.

5. **Sale of food products close to expiry date**
   - Perishable food products that are delivered close to their use-by dates, especially in large quantities, may make it difficult or impossible for consumers to finish the products within the safe timeframe.

6. **Non-deliveries**
   - Perishable food may be returned to storage and kept at unsafe temperatures if no one is available to receive the delivery.
   - Requests from customers to leave a delivery unattended on the doorstep or at the building management counter can also put the food at risk of temperature abuse, tampering and contamination.

Food safety measures for grocery delivery

1. **Time/temperature control**
- Keep chilled food at or below 4°C and frozen food at or below -18°C. Make sure the outer packaging of chilled and frozen foods are labelled "*keep refrigerated*" or "*keep frozen*" to alert the recipient.

- Preferably, use vehicles fitted with refrigeration equipment and temperature data logger to transport perishable food that needs to be kept cold during delivery. Alternatively, use ice bricks, dry ice or other means to keep food cold during transportation. Pack them in coolers, foam or corrugated cardboard and make sure that the chilled and frozen foods perishable food are not kept above 4°C for more than two hours by checking with a thermometer.

- Optimise the delivery route to shorten transportation time.

- Minimise the time that chilled or frozen foods are exposed to ambient temperature during loading, unloading, holding and transit.

- In case of any breakdown of the vehicle or its cooling units during delivery, provide an alternative vehicle that conforms to the stipulated standards promptly to ensure food safety.

- Implement a system of taking and recording temperature during food delivery and regularly calibrate refrigeration equipment and thermometers as part of the documented procedures.

2. **Protect food from contamination**
- Make sure that food transportation units, including vehicles, trolleys, boxes, trays, etc., are designed, constructed, maintained and used in a manner that protects the food from contamination.

- If the customer's order contains both food and non-food products, pack them separately using corrugate boxes or plastic bags.

- Conduct proper and thorough cleaning if a vehicle is changed from transporting non-food products to transporting food products to avoid contamination, and

keep cleaning records.

- Use tamper-evident devices, such as tear strips, on loose non-prepackaged foods such as convenient meal kits to make it obvious if the package has been opened before delivery. This helps customers know that the food has not been tampered with and is safe to eat.

3. Protect fragile foods from mechanical damage

- Place heavier items on the bottom and lighter items on top when packing different items of a customer order into a box to prevent heavy products from crushing those below.

- Make use of the packaging to convey important handling information that deliverers should know, such as applying a label with 'HANDLE WITH CARE' or 'FRAGILE' on the box when appropriate.

- Apply extra packaging and cushioning materials only when necessary, as most fragile foods already come with original packaging from producers or distributors that should be sufficient to protect the food.

4. Food Labeling

- Display accurate food labels for prepackaged food, such as nutrition information and ingredient list (including food allergens), on the online shopping platforms to enable consumers to make informed choices.

- Make sure that the food information, whether in the form of photos, graphics or texts, is consistent with the package label and is legible, readable and accessible on all devices, such as laptops and smartphones.

- Regularly check with manufacturers or suppliers, and update the website if there is a reformulation of the products or if an error in product information is detected.

5. Expiry date

- The best before date is about the *quality* of the food, while the use-by date is about *safety*. Food past its use-by date must not remain available for sale and should not be delivered to consumers.

- To avoid disputes, online shopping platform should be able alert customers automatically when the foods such as dairy, meat, bakery products and eggs, they have chosen are close to the expiry date. Alternatively, they can offer a discount for *foods near expiration* just like the usual practice of brick-and-mortar stores.

- Online shopping platforms can allow customers to communicate their preferences by providing an option to add notes to their online order (e.g. under-ripe bananas for later in the week or ready-to-eat avocado upon delivery), allowing shops to better meet consumer needs.

> **You can do more:**
> Providing consumer education on the difference between "best before" and "use by" dates can help your store in several ways:
> ✧ It can encourage product purchase closer to the expiry date;
> ✧ It can show customers that you value their health and satisfaction with your products; and
> ✧ It can help consumers reduce food waste in their homes.
> Providing FAQs on your platform is a good starting point.

6. Management of non-deliveries

- Allow customers to select their preferred delivery day and time frame to avoid missing or failed deliveries.

- Communicate with consumers by sending order and delivery notifications to keep them informed about the arrival date and time of their orders. For example, online FBOs can provide consumers tracking links that tell them when the delivery will take place, so they can make room in their schedule beforehand and are less likely to miss the delivery.

- Follow the agreed time slot. If the food order cannot be delivered at the agreed date and time, notify consumers as soon as possible.

> **You can do more:**
> Alternatively, FBOs can provide buy online, pick up in store (BOPIS) services or use grocery lockers for no-contact delivery. FBOs must ensure that perishable food is stored at proper temperatures in the stores or lockers in a hygienic

condition. For grocery lockers, there should be three temperature zones (frozen, chilled and ambient) to manage groceries with different properties.

- Set up and adhere to the company's non-delivery policy. For example, if there is no one at home to receive the delivery at the appointed time, the order will be cancelled, and the groceries will be sent back to the shop. Customers can then reschedule the delivery.

- If customers are not at home at the time of delivery, do not leave food unattended unless arrangements, such as "no-contact delivery", have been made with the customer. Advise customers that the safety of food cannot be guaranteed if it has been left unattended.

7. Hygiene of delivery vehicles

- The storage compartments of the vehicles used for transporting food and delivery containers should be:
    - maintained in good condition;
    - capable of keeping food at the proper temperature; and
    - equipped with thermometers for validating food temperature control measures.
- Storage compartments or containers used for the delivery of food should be properly cleaned for each use before commencing the delivery work.

8. Personal hygiene
- Always follow good personal hygiene practices, including proper handwashing. Wash hands thoroughly, rubbing with warm soapy water for 20 seconds, before and after handling foods or after using toilets, coughing, sneezing or nose-blowing, etc.
- Use 70-80% alcohol-based hand rub as an alternative if no handwashing facilities are available and hands are not visibly soiled.

9. Training
- FBOs should provide basic food training to their staff, including Good Hygiene Practices, contamination prevention, tampering prevention and time-temperature management.

[insert graphics of handwashing 20 sec and using hand rub]

Advice to consumers

- Before placing an order, double-check your refrigerator and pantry cupboards to ensure you are not reordering items you already have in sufficient quantity. If you are ordering food that needs to be frozen, make sure you have enough room in the freezer. This helps to avoid wasting food that might go bad before you eat it.

- Pay attention to the nature and potential risks associated with the food items that you intend to purchase online. Susceptible populations, such as the elderly, young children, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems, should take extra precautions.

- Patronise reliable licensed food premises/holders of restricted food permits, especially when buying high-risk foods. Ask the operator to provide information about their licensing status or identity and verify such information through the [website of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department](https://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/licensing/list_licensed_premises.html). (https://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/licensing/list_licensed_premises.html)

- Read food labels, including nutrition information and ingredients list, to make informed food choices.

- Take into account the expiry date or shelf-life of the food product before making an order, especially if you are not going to consume it within a short period of time.

- Make sure someone is at home to receive the groceries during the agreed time slot. Asking the deliverer to drop off groceries on your doorstep unattended or at the building management counter is not recommended, as the safety of food cannot be guaranteed if it has been left unattended.

- Upon receiving the groceries, check to make sure chilled food is cold, and frozen food is frozen solid. Put chilled and frozen foods into the refrigerator or freezer as soon as possible.

- If the food packaging is damaged or the food quality looks abnormal, do not eat the food and return it to the vendor.