

Food Safety Guidelines for Food Recovery

Introduction

In recent years, there have been growing concerns about food waste and related environmental costs in Hong Kong. To make better use of the food resources available in the community, food recovery, i.e. collecting wholesome food and redistributing them, provides meals for the people in need and minimises food waste at the same time.

2. Food safety principles should be applied to food donated to charity, regardless of the types and sources of food. As such, the Centre for Food Safety issued this set of food safety guidelines to assist organisations in ensuring food safety while conducting food recovery programmes.

Safeguarding Food Safety in Food Recovery

3. There are different types of food recovery, with two key factors determining the mode of operation. These two key factors are: -

- a. The type of donated food, i.e. perishable food (such as fresh produce from supermarkets and wet markets; bakery products from bakery; or prepared food from food service establishments) versus non-perishable food (such as rice, dry noodles, canned food, etc.).
- b. The processing steps involved, such as distribution, re-heating, and/or cooking.

4. Regardless of the modes of operation, generally food recovery starts with receiving good faith food donations that are apparently wholesome. Similar to making food purchases, food donations should be obtained from reliable sources, such as licensed food premises. Do not accept food from illegal or questionable sources. Before accepting food donations, operators from food recovery programmes shall meet the potential donors, such as supermarkets, hotels, canteens, etc., to understand their operations (including visit to food storage and kitchen areas, if possible), to determine the types of excess food that are suitable for donation and to work out the logistic arrangement so that the food would be available for the people in need in a timely manner to minimise food safety risk. For management and food tracing purposes, it is recommended that food recovery programmes establish a list of accepted donors.

Receiving / Picking up

5. In Hong Kong, donated food is often picked up by food recovery programmes at the donor establishments, rather than delivered by the donors to the food recovery programmes. Practices related to food safety at this stage include the following:

- Pack the food in clean and covered containers and mark the pack-date as the picking up may not be on the same date that the food is made available
- Store the food in appropriate storage, for example to store chilled food at refrigerator at or below 4°C.
- Do not pick up food that has been kept at inappropriate temperature, such as ready-to-eat food kept at the room temperature.
- Use insulated containers (e.g. coolers) and ice packs, if necessary, to maintain food temperature during transportation.
- Transporting vehicle should not be used for purposes other than delivering food.
- Clean the transportation vehicles on a regular basis.

Food inspection

6. The purpose of food inspection in food recovery is to evaluate donated food to determine its fitness for human consumption. Whenever a clear decision cannot be made, i.e., when in doubt, the best practice is to throw it away.

Prepackaged food

Package must be sealed and in good condition. Throw away :-

- Foods with mould, odd smell, discolouration, unusual product separation, and/or signs of insect or rodent infestation;
- Food that are in packages with holes or tears; broken seal or tampered resistant tape;
- Canned foods that are swollen/bulging, moderately to severely dented, rusty (unless minor rust can be wiped off), leaking, mouldy and/or with improperly formed/defective seam;
- Food in glass or plastic containers that are with bulged, loose or crooked cap, leaks (stained label as a sign), cracks or chips on containers;
- Food that has past their “Use by” date;

- Food that are not properly labelled with food name, ingredients and expiry date.

Fresh produce and meat

- Throw away fresh produce that are mouldy, slimy, limp, dried out, wrinkled, smell bad, and/or with excessive bruises/scars/soft spots.
- Throw away potatoes that have sprouting eyes.
- Throw away frozen food that has been previously thawed and then refrozen.
- Throw away raw meat that has rotten odours, discolouration, and/or large amount of blood/liquid in a “puddle” found in the package.

Ready-to-eat food

- Excess ready-to-eat foods are often available from hotels, catering service providers and lunch box providers. These foods must be obtained from licensed establishments. Throw away ready-to-eat foods that are mouldy, stale and/or with odd smell.

Bakery products

In Hong Kong, many bakeries donate unsold freshly baked products upon closing every day. These products are often made available for breakfast consumption on the following day. Under this scenario -

- Follow the guidelines on expiry date if the expiry date is provided.
- If expiry date is not provided, only re-distribute bakery products without fresh cream and/or stuffing (such as sandwich bread and rolls).
- For products with fresh cream and/or stuffing (such as BBQ pork buns, tuna buns and sausage bun), only re-distribute them if refrigeration is available for storage overnight.

Storage and inventory

7. The First In, First Out (FIFO) principle may not be applicable in the food recovery as the same product may come from different sources with different expiry dates. Expiry date is an essential piece of information on the inventory record to facilitate timely outgoing transactions and avoid wastage.

8. Food recovery operators should keep track of the inventory not only for storage purpose, but also for traceability. It is suggested that food recovery operation be enrolled in the CFS's Rapid Alert System to receive timely information on food incidents (http://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/rapid_alert/rapid_alert.html).

9. Food recovery should follow good storage practices as in other commercial food establishments : -

Dry storage

- Store food off the floor and away from the walls, e.g. store on shelves or pallets.
- Store non-food items, such as liquid soaps and bleach, separately.
- Clean the storage area, including the floor, pallets and shelves, regularly.
- Maintain proper temperature and humidity in storage areas.
- Keep doors, windows and roofs well sealed to prevent pest entry and water damage.
- Implement pest control programme.

Cold food storage

- Maintain proper temperature of cold storage - at or below 4°C for refrigerator; at or below -18°C for freezer.
- Check and record temperature regularly.
- Store raw meat and ready-to-eat food separately. Ideally use two separate refrigerators, if not, store raw meat below ready-to-eat food to prevent juices from dripping onto ready-to-eat food.
- Do not overstuff the refrigerator and freezer.
- Clean refrigerator and freezer regularly.
- Defrost freezer when necessary to prevent development of thick frost.

10. Any foods that are not fit for human consumption should be put in containers clearly marked for "Food for Disposal".

Food preparation, transport and serving

11. Reheating is the key step to safeguard food safety in most food recovery programmes. Cooked food obtained from donors should not be reheated more than

once. Furthermore, operators should reheat food thoroughly before serving the clients.

12. Selected food recovery operations and non-governmental social service organisations may have food preparation facilities for meal cooking. Same as in commercial food establishments, to minimise food safety risks, food handlers should maintain good personal hygiene (such as washing hands correctly and refraining from work if being sick), avoid cross-contamination (such as using separate utensils to handle raw food and ready-to-eat food), and prevent time-temperature abuse of foods. Perishable food items should not be stored between 4°C and 60°C to avoid bacterial overgrowth, and they should be discarded after being kept at room temperature for more than four hours. Job-related food hygiene training should be provided to food handlers including volunteers, part-time and permanent staff. For details of these food safety practices, please refer to “5 Keys to Food Safety (for trade)” (http://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/multimedia/multimedia_pub/files/5keys_Bk_Trade_E.pdf).

13. Meals prepared by food recovery operations and non-governmental social service organisations may be either consumed at site or provided to the people in need in the form of meal boxes. The following good practices should be followed if meal boxes are delivered to people in other locations:

- Store meal boxes in hygienic insulation boxes during transportation.
- Measure and record temperature of the meals before delivery and on arrival to ensure meals are kept at above 60°C

For preparing meal boxes, please refer to “Developing a school food safety plan based on HACCP system (for school lunch box caterers)” (http://www.cfs.gov.hk/english/programme/programme_haccp/files/lunchbox.pdf) for information on relevant food safety practices.

14. For more information or other enquires, please contact the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department on 2868 0000 or visit the CFS’s website (www.cfs.gov.hk).

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