

Prepared dishes - Food Safety Advice for Food Businesses and Consumers

This set of advice is intended for both food business operators (FBOs) who prepare and sell prepared dishes, as well as consumers. It aims to help FBOs to implement food safety measures in their operations to produce and supply wholesome prepared dishes, while also providing guidance to consumers on the safe handling and storage of these products.

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 FBO should consider in providing safe foods to consumers.

Prepared dishes generally refer to foods made from one or more food ingredients. These products are subjected to processing methods (e.g. cutting, mixing, marinating, kneading, seasoning, etc.) and/or cooking techniques (e.g. frying, roasting, boiling, steaming, etc.), and are subsequently prepared as either finished or semi-finished dishes. While the term “prepared dishes” is relatively new, the concept is not. 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. To ensure food safety and quality, prepared dishes should be stored, transported, and sold under conditions specified on the product label.

Common food safety problems related to prepared dishes

1. 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 to eliminate harmful microorganisms.

2. Contamination during preparation

- ✓ Microbiological contamination is a key food safety risk in prepared dishes due to extensive processing and handling. To prevent cross-contamination, always use separate utensils and equipment for handling raw and cooked or ready-to-eat food. Maintain proper personal hygiene, including frequent handwashing with soap and water and avoiding food handling when unwell.

3. Improper temperature and time control during transportation and storage

- ✓ Make sure that the cold chain is well maintained during the whole storage and transportation of prepared dishes. Avoid exposing prepared dishes to the “[Temperature Danger Zone](#)” between 4°C and 60°C, where bacteria can rapidly multiply.

Food safety measures for the preparation of prepared dishes

- **Purchasing and receiving ingredients**
 - Obtain food ingredients from approved and reliable suppliers.
 - Upon receipt, check ingredients promptly to ensure: chilled and frozen items are at appropriate temperatures (e.g. frozen items at -18°C or below and chilled items at 4°C or below); there is no bad odour, discolouration, or signs of contamination or damage to the packaging; the expiry dates of prepackaged ingredients are still valid.
- **Storage and temperature control**
 - Refrigerate perishable foods promptly. Keep chillers at or below 4°C and freezers at or below -18°C.
 - Cover foods and ensure that storage areas are clean.
 - Store raw and cooked foods separately: ideally in two refrigerators; if not, place cooked foods on the upper shelf and raw foods on the lower shelf.
 - Avoid overloading the refrigerator and adhere to the “first-in, first-out (FIFO)” stock rotation practice.
- **Preparation**
 - Plan preparation schedules and cook prepared dishes in manageable batches to maintain proper temperature and time control during cooking and cooling.
 - Use designated utensils for raw and cooked foods to prevent cross-contamination.
 - Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly under potable running water, ideally in a sink exclusive for this use.
 - Defrost frozen raw materials thoroughly before cooking, unless specified by the manufacturers. Avoid defrosting at room temperature.
 - Do not refreeze defrosted foods unless defrosted in the refrigerator. Food defrosted in a microwave oven or under running cold tap water should be cooked immediately after defrosting.
 - Cook food thoroughly and use a food thermometer to check that the core temperature reaches at least 75°C. Bring soups and stews to a boil for at least one minute.
- **Cooling**
 - Cooked food intended to be packaged into prepared dishes should be properly cooled down using [safe chilling methods](#) to reduce the time that it is exposed to dangerous temperatures and reduce the risk of bacterial growth.

- **Packaging and food labelling**

- Use packaging materials that are suitable for the food, durable enough to withstand processing, storage and transportation, and safe to avoid compromising food safety.
- Packaging and wrapping should be done under hygienic conditions by staff with appropriate training in food hygiene and food safety to protect food from risks of contamination.
- Prepared dishes that are packaged as prepackaged food shall be marked and labelled in accordance with Cap. 132W Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations. Unless otherwise exempted, the law stipulates the following information to be legibly marked on the food label of all prepackaged food:
 1. Name of the food or designation;
 2. List of ingredients, including ingredients, allergenic substances, and additives;
 3. Indication of durability;
 4. Statement of special conditions for storage or instructions for use;
 5. Count, weight or volume of food;
 6. Name and address of manufacturer or packer; and
 7. Nutrition Label

[Click here](#) for more information about the preparation of legible food label.

[Click here](#) for technical guidance on nutrition labelling and nutrition claims.

- **Storage and Transportation**

- Keep prepared dishes at proper temperatures (chilled state at 4°C or below; frozen state at -18°C or below) to prevent bacterial growth during storage and pending for delivery.
- The storage compartments of the vehicles used for transporting prepared dishes should be:
 - ✓ maintained in good condition;
 - ✓ capable of keeping food at the proper temperature; and
 - ✓ equipped with thermometers to validate temperature control.
- Use vehicles with refrigeration equipment and temperature data logger for transporting prepared dishes. Ensure chilled and frozen prepared dishes are not above 4°C for more than two hours.
- Minimise the time that chilled and frozen prepared dishes are exposed to ambient temperature during loading, unloading, and transit.

Advice on Personal and Environmental Hygiene for Food Handlers

- **Personal Hygiene**

- Proper work attire can reduce risk of food contamination during preparation.
- Wash hands thoroughly before handling food, after using the toilet or after touching unclean items (e.g. after handling garbage or cash). Rub hands with liquid soap for at least 20 seconds.

- **Environmental Hygiene**

- Hand washing and drying facilities should be suitably located in food preparation or production areas and supplied with liquid hand soap.
- Regularly clean, sanitise and repair defects in food preparation areas to ensure good hygiene.
- Keep refrigeration facilities in good condition. Make sure temperature controls are functioning properly.

Food safety management system

Implement a preventive food safety management system (such as the HACCP-based Food Safety Plan) to identify and control food safety problems at every stage of the food manufacturing process.

[Click here](#) for more information about how to implement a food safety plan.

Advice to consumers

Following the “Five Keys to Food Safety” can help prevent the spread of foodborne diseases and ensure food safety in a holistic manner.

- **Purchase**

- Buy prepared dishes from hygienic and reliable licensed premises.
- Take note of the “use by” and “best before” dates of the prepared dishes before purchase. Do not eat prepared dishes past its “use by” date.
- Read food labels, including nutrition information and ingredient list, to make informed food choices.

- **Storage, Preparation and Serving**

- Store prepared dishes according to the manufacturer’s instructions listed on the food labels, such as “keep refrigerated at or below 4°C”.

- Follow the instructions on the packaging to defrost frozen prepared dishes. Do not defrost food at room temperature.
- Cook or reheat prepared dishes thoroughly according to the instructions on the packaging, including the recommended cooking time, cooking temperature and cooking method.
- Once prepared dishes are thoroughly cooked or reheated, consume them as soon as possible. Cooked food not consumed immediately should be kept at a safe temperature, i.e. hot food above 60°C, cold food at or below 4°C. Discard cooked food that has been left at room temperature for more than 4 hours.

Relevant Information

- [Cooling and Reheating Prepared Foods - Food Safety Guidelines for Food Businesses](#)
- [Poon Choi - Food Safety Guidelines for Food Businesses](#)
- [Rice with Two Sides and Other Takeaway Foods for Hot Holding and Display - Food Safety Guidelines for Food Businesses](#)