

Hygiene Guidelines on Preparation and Supply of Ready-to-eat Food

Introduction:

Ready-to-eat food refers to food that is uncooked or cooked, hot or frozen/refrigerated, and can be consumed without further heat treatment (including reheating). Examples include salad, sushi, siu-mei (roasted meat), lo-mei (meat braised in seasoning sauce), and edible ice, among others. But if good personal, environmental and food hygiene is not well observed during the handling or storage of ready-to-eat food, there is a risk of cross-contamination which can lead to the spread of pathogenic microorganisms, increasing the risk associated with consumption of the finished products.

Objective:

The Guidelines are intended to remind the sector of the food hygiene and safety issues to be considered in the preparation and supply of ready-to-eat food in order to ensure food safety.

Scope of Applicability:

The Guidelines apply to production and operation establishments engaged in the production and supply of ready-to-eat food, including shops providing takeaway, dine-in and buffet services, premises for the preparation of such food, and venues for teaching how to prepare such food.

Definition:

Ready-to-eat food: refers to food provided by food producers, manufacturers or retailers that is intended for direct human consumption, and is ready for immediate consumption at the point of sale. It can be uncooked or cooked, hot or frozen/refrigerated, and can be consumed without further heat treatment (including reheating).

Content:

Important highlights:

- Ready-to-eat food refers to food that can be consumed without further cooking, such as salad, sushi, roasted meat, hand-shaken beverages and edible ice. Improper handling and storage of ready-to-eat food can increase the risk associated with consumption of the finished products.
- All food and beverage utensils must be thoroughly cleaned and sanitised before and after use.
- Food producers and operators have to ensure good personal and environmental hygiene.
- When preparing and handling food, food handlers should:
 - Use separate utensils and equipment to handle raw food and ready-to-eat food;
 - Ensure that food is stored in a hygienic environment and at the appropriate temperatures (hot food at above 60°C and cold food at or below 5°C).
- Food producers and operators have to ensure that food handlers have full knowledge and understanding of the hygiene requirements for handling ready-to-eat food.

1. Purchase and receipt

- Purchase food ingredients and seasonings from legal and reputable suppliers;
- Coordinate delivery time and details with suppliers to ensure proper receipt of goods;
- Select food ingredients and seasonings that are within their expiry dates;
- Choose fresh food ingredients and seasonings that meet the hygiene requirements, and check their quality upon receipt:
 - Check the temperature of the food;
 - Check whether the food is properly protected;
 - Check the appearance of the food and see whether the packaging is intact;
 - Look for any sign of contamination or spoilage;

- Use pasteurised food ingredients (e.g. liquid eggs, milk) for making food products that do not require heat treatment (e.g. ready-to-eat dessert);
- Keep records of incoming and outgoing food products, organise the records timely and keep them properly.

2. Proper storage

- Keep storage areas, storage shelves and storage containers clean and dry;
- Make sure refrigeration/freezing equipment is functioning properly and within the normal temperature range;
- Arrange the storage conditions suitably, such as refrigeration and freezing, and storage of dry goods, based on food types;
- Assess whether there is sufficient storage space, and avoid overstocking of goods;
- All food products must be stored off the ground, and separately away from chemicals/cleaning items;
- Store raw food and ready-to-eat food separately. In the case of storing them in the same refrigerator, always adhere to the principle of “storing cooked food above raw food”, or use two refrigerators, one for storage of raw food and the other for ready-to-eat food;
- Adhere to the “first-in, first-out” principle to prioritise the consumption of food ingredients that are closer to their expiry dates.

3. Careful preparation

- Plan the amounts of food ingredients needed and time required for food preparation beforehand. Avoid preparing too much food or preparing it too far in advance;
- Use separate utensils and equipment to handle raw food and ready-to-eat food. If conditions are limited and raw food and ready-to-eat food have to be handled with the same utensils or processed with same equipment, always thoroughly clean and sanitise the utensils

and equipment before and after use to avoid cross-contamination¹;

- When handling raw ingredients (e.g. rinsing raw meat, pooling of eggs), avoid spattering raw ingredients or their juices onto other food or food contact surfaces. Thoroughly clean and sanitise the surrounding areas after the handling to prevent contamination of ready-to-eat food;

- Choose a safe way to thaw frozen food² ;



Thaw at refrigeration
temperatures
(the safest way)



Thaw under running tap water
(put the to-be-thawed food
in a food storage bag)



Thaw in a microwave
(cook the thawed food
immediately)



- Do not reuse food service disposables, like tableware, containers or food wrapping materials;
- Properly wash and handle fruits, vegetables and salad ingredients³;
- Food ingredients that require cooking must be thoroughly cooked to a core temperature of 75°C for at least 15 seconds. The cooking temperatures for different types of food have to be high enough to kill harmful bacteria;
- Food cooling has to be done as quickly as possible. Firstly, food is to be cooled from 60°C to 21°C within 2 hours or less, and then from 21°C to below 5°C within the next 4 hours or less. Food should only

¹ Refer to “Hygiene Guidelines on Prevention of Cross-contamination”.

² Refer to “Guidelines on Defrosting Food”

³ Refer to “Hygiene Guidelines on Preparation and Sale of Salads”.

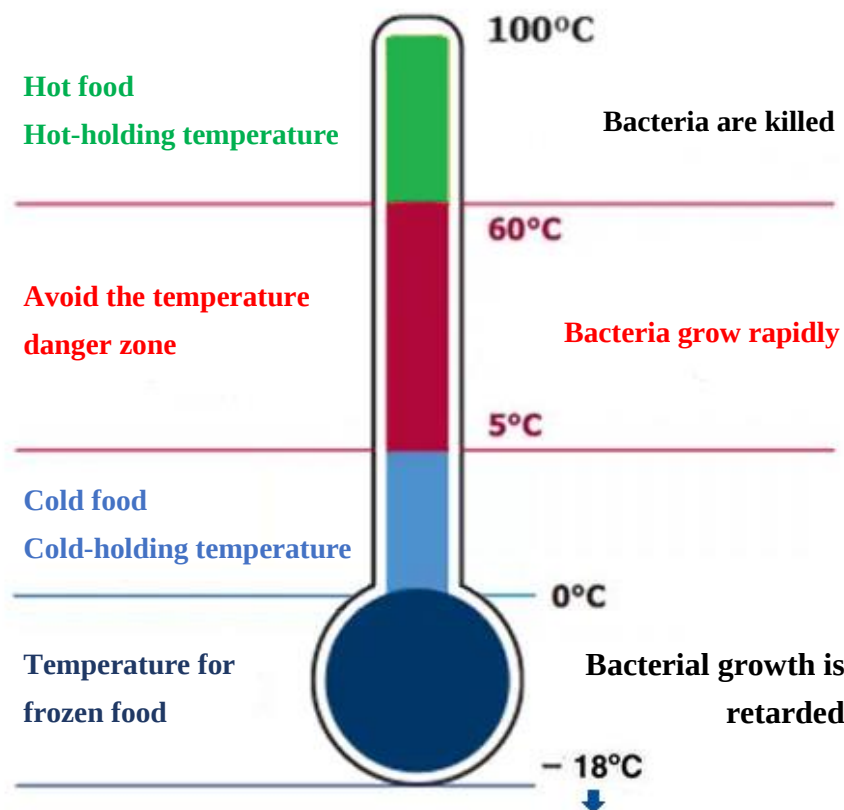
be reheated once, and any leftover of the reheated food should be discarded⁴.

4. Meal packaging

- Tableware or disposable tableware/containers used for meal packaging must be clean and hygienic, and adequately protected from contamination by dust and insects;
- Choose the type of disposable tableware/containers based on the nature of food, its temperature, and how it is to be consumed⁵.

5. Key points for hot and cold storage

- For ready-to-eat food that is not to be consumed immediately after cooking, maintain hot food at above 60°C, and cold food at 5°C or below, except for some food that can be stored at room temperature for a short period of time (such as biscuits, bread and other low-water-activity food);

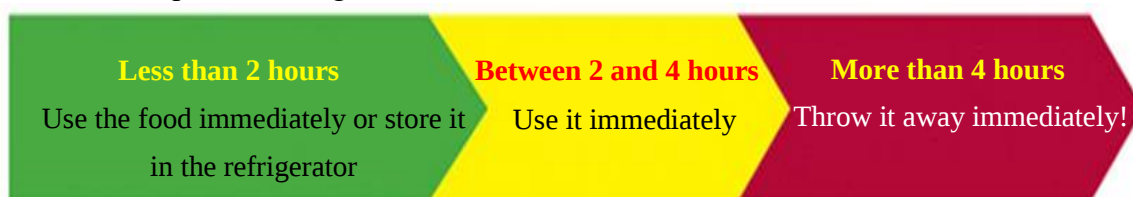


⁴ Refer to “Guidelines on Cooling and Reheating Food”.

⁵ Refer to “Guidelines on Use of Disposable Tableware”.

- Since ready-to-eat food is potentially hazardous food, it is necessary to shorten the time such food is left in the temperature danger zone (5°C to 60°C) as far as possible throughout the entire production and operation process. However, in unavoidable situations, the 2-hour/4-hour rule should be followed.

Food in temperature danger zone:



6. Observe good personal and environmental hygiene

1) Personal hygiene

- Wear neat and clean work clothes, and cover hair with a hat;
- Wash hands properly before and after handling food, after using the toilet and handling garbage;
- When handling ready-to-eat food, avoid hands and clothing coming into direct contact with food, and do not handle money and food ingredients at the same time;
- Use disposable gloves as necessary. If the gloves have come into contact with unclean objects or have been used for more than 30 minutes, replace them with new ones;
- One should pay attention to personal hygiene and avoid touching his/her mouth, eyes and nose with hands. When sneezing or coughing, he/she should turn away from the food, cover his/her mouth and nose with a tissue, dispose of the used tissue properly and then wash hands immediately. If tissues are not available, one should sneeze into the sleeve of his/her upper arm to prevent the spread of bacteria through the respiratory droplets emitted during sneezing or coughing;

- If one has symptoms such as runny nose, diarrhoea, vomiting or fever, stay away from handling food.

2) Environmental hygiene

- All the areas where ready-to-eat food is prepared, stored or displayed must be cleaned and disinfected regularly;
- Handle ready-to-eat food in a designated area in the food-handling area or in a separate area equipped with temperature control. If the food-handling area is used for handling various kinds of food, a work plan is necessary to schedule the use of the food-handling area for handling different food, define respective workflow, and make a schedule for cleaning and disinfection, so as to reduce the risk of cross-contamination;
- All food and beverage utensils must be thoroughly cleaned and sanitised before use⁶;
- Use cleaning cloths correctly, and adopt a colour-coding system to designate a specific colour for cleaning cloths used for different purposes (e.g. brown cloths for cleaning areas for handling of raw food, and blue cloths for cleaning areas for handling ready-to-eat food) to minimise risk of cross-contamination⁷;
- Do not store chemicals, such as cleaning agents, in the food-handling area.

7. Responsibilities of food producers and operators

- Provide food handlers with appropriate training and guidance on food safety and hygiene based on the nature of their work;
- Specialised personnel should also have a clear understanding on other basic hygiene requirements not listed in these Guidelines. For details on other guidelines on food safety and hygiene, please refer to “Food Safety Information”.

⁶ Refer to “Hygiene Guidelines on Cleaning and Disinfection of Dining Utensils”.

⁷ Refer to “Guidelines on Use of Fabric Products”.

- If raw or undercooked food is served on the premises by the food producers and operators, they should proactively tell the customers about the health risks⁸ associated with such food, or state the health risks in the food menus, so that customers can make informed and reasonable choices by taking into consideration of the risk involved;
- The microbiological levels in food can reflect the safety and hygienic quality of food. IAM has compiled “Microbiological Guidelines for Ready-to-eat Food” to facilitate the sector and law enforcement officials in risk monitoring of the microbiological levels in “ready-to-eat food” (including ice cream), and in making accurate interpretation of the test results and carrying out effective follow-up measures to improve the safety of food products.

⁸ Raw or undercooked food may pose a higher health risk, especially for high-risk groups such as pregnant women, infants and young children, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems.