Food Safety for Community Suppers

Community suppers are gatherings where groups of people with common interests can socialize, network, celebrate or work while sharing a meal. These events are fun and productive but can quickly lead to disaster when basic food safety practices are not followed.

Foodborne illness occurs when pathogens are passed from food to person. In group settings, a foodborne pathogen can sicken many people. Most healthy adults tolerate foodborne pathogens without significant illness. However, infants, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems can experience serious complications and even death. Most cases of foodborne illness can be prevented by proper handling of food.

In the planning stage of a community supper, organizers should designate a reliable person to be responsible for food safety. The designated person should be up to date on current food handling practices. The following basic food safety guidelines provide detailed information on maintaining cleanliness, controlling the time and temperature that food is held at and avoiding the transfer of harmful bacteria to foods (cross-contamination). These guidelines should be strictly adhered to when coordinating and preparing food for a community supper.

Cleanliness

Food can be contaminated by coughs, sneezes, handling, dirty equipment, vermin, animals and wastes. It should be protected during storage, preparation, display and service.

Clean Hands: Everyone involved in food service should keep their hands extra clean at all times.

Effective hand washing requires thorough cleaning of hands and fingernails with soap and water:
- before working with foods
- after using the toilet
- every time hands are soiled

Hands can easily become a vehicle for foodborne pathogens through seemingly innocent acts like scratching the scalp, running fingers through hair or touching a pimple.

To properly wash hands:
1. Wet hands with warm water.
2. Generously apply soap.
3. Rub hands vigorously for at least 20 seconds.
4. Scrub under nails with a clean nailbrush.
5. Rinse hands under clean, warm, running water.
6. Dry hands using a clean paper towel.

Healthy Workers: Diseases can be passed from person to person by food. People with open wounds, a sore throat with fever, diarrhea, and eye or ear infections should not handle foods. Everyone involved in food service should wear clean clothing (including aprons or smocks), closed toe leather shoes (no sandals or canvas tennis shoes), and a hair covering to restrain hair. Workers who touch food as part of the preparation process should wear clean, single-use, plastic gloves (or food grade plastic bags) over their hands.

Sanitized Utensils & Clean Serving Dishes: Dirty utensils can spread pathogens during food preparation and service. Don’t allow serving utensils to be used for more than one dish; there should be a separate serving utensil for each food to prevent the spread of pathogens. When cleaning
utensils scrape away food debris and soak utensils if necessary. Then, wash in hot, soapy water and rinse. Sanitize utensils by immersing them in hot water (140 °F) that contains ½ tablespoon chlorine bleach per 1 gallon of water.

It is important to keep forks, knives and paper plates and cups clean. They should be stored in a location where they will stay clean and handled carefully during serving.

**Time & Temperature Control**
Food is safest immediately after it is prepared. The longer it is held (hot or cold) the greater the chance that it will become unsafe. Monitoring the amount of time that food spends at temperatures between 40 °F – 140 °F is critical to safety. Bacteria grow best in lukewarm foods so hot foods should be kept hot (140 °F or higher) for no longer than two hours and cold foods should be kept cold (40 °F or lower). Perishable food is safe when it is stored at the correct temperature, cooked to the correct minimum internal temperature, and served/held at the correct holding temperature. It is temperature abused when it is allowed to stay in the temperature danger zone for more than two hours. For example: If it takes two hours to make a chicken salad, it is refrigerated overnight and the next day it is left on the buffet table for two hours, the total time at room temperature is four hours. Food that has been contaminated and allowed to remain at room temperature for four hours can cause illness. Storing food in the refrigerator slows pathogen growth but does not stop it.

Hot and cold holding systems present special problems in food handling. Foodborne illnesses, in community settings, can be caused by using improper holding temperatures for hazardous foods or by preparing foods too long before they are eaten. A knowledgeable food-service worker should supervise hot and cold holding systems for buffets or dinners. At the very least, ask an adult to accept responsibility for monitoring the temperatures in the food-holding units. Temperatures must be monitored during preparation, storage and service. Measure food temperature at regular intervals with a metal-stem thermometer and sanitize the stem between uses. The most perishable foods contain meat, poultry, seafood, eggs or milk.

**Hot Foods:** Keep protein foods such as seafood, poultry and cooked meats hot by using an electric hot tray or chafing dish. Small candle warming units may not keep foods hot enough.
- Do not let hot food stand at room temperature for more than two hours, (including preparation, storage and serving time).
- Do not prepare food more than four hours before serving it. Prepare potentially hazardous foods no more than three hours before serving.
- When using a hot-holding table, be sure food temperature is above 140 °F. Casseroles, gravies and meats are safest if they are maintained at 165 °F or above.
- Cover pans containing hot food so that heat does not escape rapidly.

**Cold Foods:** There are many dishes that should be held at temperatures below 40°F. Cream pies, puddings, seafood salads, eggs, fish, meat and poultry are common examples. Holding them below 40°F will keep potentially harmful bacteria from growing to dangerous levels. When handling cold foods never let them stand at room temperature for more than two hours including preparation, storage and serving time. Do not thaw meat on the counter or hold casseroles at room temperature before baking.

**Room Temperature Foods:** Dry foods (breads, granola and crackers) are stable at room temperature, as are foods like jams, jellies or pickles that are "preserved" with sugar, salt or vinegar. If hot and cold storage facilities are unavailable or inadequate, the safest choices are foods that are stable at room temperature.

**Foods that are Sometimes Problematic:** Cooked or cut-up raw fruits and vegetables and processed meats belong in this category. Be cautious with cooked vegetables, fruit salads, green salads, luncheon meats, hot dogs and cheeses.

**Potentially Hazardous Foods:** Foods of animal origin and cooked starch foods are potentially hazardous. Exercise extreme caution with meats, potatoes, potato-containing foods, cooked rice, custards, puddings, pies, gravies, bread stuffing, beans, salads containing meat, starchy foods, whipped cream and desserts that contain milk or egg.
**Cooking Temperatures:** Cooking foods to a specified minimum temperature is required to destroy harmful germs. Use a food thermometer to ensure that all parts of cooked foods reach a safe internal temperature. Cooking “by the clock” is not a reliable safety measure. Other safe temperature guidelines include:

- No slow cooking at low temperatures. If cooking takes six hours or more or if cooking temperature is less than 300 °F, microorganisms may grow during the early cooking period.
- No partial cooking of foods. Do not partially cook and then hold food before final cooking.
- Cook with a constant heat source. For example, do not preheat the oven to 450 ºF, put a casserole in to bake, then turn the oven off and let the casserole stand in the oven for an hour.

The USDA recommended minimum internal temperatures for common community dinners are as follows:

**145 °F**
- Beef, lamb, pork and veal steaks, roasts and chops (medium rare) plus a 3-minute rest time*
- Fish and shellfish

**160 °F**
- Egg dishes
- Ground beef, veal, pork or lamb

**165 °F**
- Leftovers
- Poultry
- Stuffing and casseroles

*After you remove meat from a grill, oven, or other heat source, allow it to rest for the specified amount of time. During the rest time, its temperature remains constant or continues to rise, which destroys harmful germs.

**Take-Out Foods**
Sometimes people will bring take-out foods to a community supper. The same basic food safety rules apply to prepared foods purchased from a deli or restaurant.

- Do not leave take-out foods at room temperature longer than two hours.
- Refrigerate cold foods at 40 °F or lower until serving time.
- If the food is hot, and you'll be eating within two hours, keep it hot (140 °F) in a 200 °F to 250 °F oven.
- If you are picking up hot foods far in advance, refrigerate them. "Thick foods" such as stews and layers of meat slices should be refrigerated in shallow dishes so they cool faster.

**Leftovers**
- Divide large amounts of hot leftovers directly into small, shallow containers for quick cooling and place directly in the refrigerator or freezer. Discard food that has been left standing at room temperature for more than two hours.
- The center of hot foods that are cooling should reach a temperature of 45 °F within four hours to prevent growth of pathogens.
- Cool food in containers with loose covers. Tight covers do not allow air to circulate around the food to cool it rapidly.
- Place containers of hot food in the refrigerator side by side with air space in between.
- Refrigerator temperature should be set and maintained between 34 and 40 °F.
- Date leftovers so they can be used within a safe time. Most foods remain safe when refrigerated for three to five days, although ground meats and meat gravies should be kept only for one to two days.

If in doubt, throw it out rather than risk a foodborne illness. Never taste food that looks or smells strange to see if you can still use it. Even a small amount of contaminated food can cause illness.

**Cross-contamination of Food**
Cross-contamination occurs when bacteria spreads from one food to another. This can create an unsafe situation when bacteria are transferred to a food that will not be cooked so that there is no opportunity to destroy the bacteria. In these cases harmful bacteria may multiply to dangerous levels. Cross-
contamination can be avoided by following these rules:

- Keep cooked foods separate from raw foods.
- Thaw and store meat and poultry in a pan or tray with a lip to prevent dripping juices from contaminating other foods and surfaces.
- Wash and sanitize equipment, utensils, counter tops, surfaces and hands that have touched raw foods before allowing contact with finished foods.
- Wash and sanitize counters and utensils every two hours when food is being prepared. To sanitize utensils, immerse them in water containing ½ tablespoon chlorine bleach per 1 gallon of warm water for a minimum of 1 minute. Utensils can be hot sanitized by immersing them in water that is 170 °F for no less than 30 seconds. Rinse cycles in dishwashers should be 180 °F. Sanitize counters by washing them with a solution of 1 tablespoon chlorine bleach per 1 gallon of warm water.

**Beverages**

Acidic beverages such as fruit juice or punch must be prepared, stored and served in containers made from food-grade plastic, stainless steel, or glass. Porcelain, enamelware or metals other than stainless steel should not be used.

**Food Safety Control**

Churches, schools and other groups qualify as food-service establishments when they offer individual portions of food for sale at bazaars and bake sales. If your organization is planning a food-related activity, contact your local public health department. The health department can inspect the facilities. They can also give advice about the types of foods than can be prepared safely and tell you about regulations that may apply to your planned event. South Carolina has special rules for non-profit bake sales and bazaars. Non-profit organizations are often allowed to sell some food items without a permit.

**Sources:**


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