

## Occasional Cooking for a Crowd

Many organizations rely on volunteers to raise funds, and these activities often involve handling food. If you've volunteered to prepare, serve, or handle food at a banquet, church supper, pancake breakfast, community kitchen, festival booth, community bake sale, or family reunion, it's important to learn how to protect yourself and the crowd you are about to feed. Armed with a little safe food handling knowledge, the occasional cook can safely have fun and make a profit for the organization.



### Permits

If your group sells food to the public for a short period, you may need a temporary food service permit. To decide if you need a permit, contact your local health department at least one week before the event. The health department may charge a small fee or do an inspection. The health department staff is knowledgeable about food safety and can make suggestions of how to safely serve food and meet health regulations.

### Planning

Plan the menu around safe food handling. Remember, perishable foods such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, combination salads, and even fresh fruits and vegetables must be kept cold. The type of menus you select and the recipes you use should be based on several factors:

- equipment and space available
- labor and time
- profit to be made
- season
- occasion and group
- the number of people to be served
- type of service
- meal appeal
- standardized quantity recipes

A committee should be selected to consider these issues. Keeping good records to manage the event and planning for future events will help eliminate problems. Beware of cutting corners to increase profit, as doing so may affect food safety.

### Cleanliness

Ideally, the location should have facilities for washing hands and utensils. Hand washing is the single most effective action in preventing the spread of disease-causing bacteria. Wash your hands thoroughly before handling food and between jobs.



Use soap and water. Scrub for at least 30 seconds. The same technique is required if you use disposable towelettes or instant antibacterial hand gels. Or, set up a proper hand washing location by placing water in an unplugged coffee urn or a large insulated drink container with a spigot. You will need liquid soap and paper towels, a container to catch the wastewater, and a proper place for used paper towels.

If water is not available, store dirty utensils, dishware, and cooking equipment in a large covered container to prevent the attraction of flies and other insects. Then, transport the container to a location where

a dishwasher or three-compartment sink is available.



If water is available, make a mock three-compartment sink by using three large tubs. Wash with warm, soapy water in compartment one; rinse off

the soap in compartment two; and immerse utensils completely, for at least one minute, in a sanitizing solution in compartment three. Allow the utensils to air-dry on a clean rack. Change the water frequently.

Wash, rinse, and sanitize all equipment, grills, and utensils before and after the event. Use two tablespoons of bleach per gallon of warm water to sanitize. Sanitizing solution may be stored in a spray bottle to disinfect food preparation surfaces. Clean the surface first with warm, soapy water. Then spray the surface with sanitizing solution, spread the solution over the surface with a clean paper towel, and air-dry.

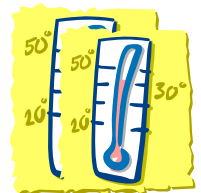
Besides washing hands thoroughly, the occasional cook should practice other good person hygiene, such as:

- wearing clean clothing and a clean apron
- wearing gloves when handling foods that will not be cooked
- keeping hair tied back and covered with a head covering
- not chewing tobacco, smoking, eating, or drinking while working with food
- not serving food when ill
- not coughing or sneezing on food.

To prevent contamination, cover all food with plastic wrap, aluminum foil, or lids, or keep foods and supplies in their original packaging contamination. Garbage cans with plastic liners and lids should be available to prevent garbage overflow. You should have access to a dumpster so you can empty cans frequently.

## Safe Food Handling Practices

- 🔪 Use only food from approved sources. Never use home-canned foods.
- 🔪 Do not thaw foods at room temperature. Thaw in the refrigerator or in cool running water changed every 30 minutes, or defrost in a microwave and cook immediately.
- 🔪 Do not partially cook or microwave meat for later grilling. When you must cook ahead, cook the food completely and refrigerate immediately. Then pack in a cooler with ice. Reheat quickly to 165°F on the grill.
- 🔪 Improper cooling is one of the most common causes of foodborne illness. If your group is preparing large quantities of food, such as lasagna, barbecue, or roasts in advance, cool rapidly in small, shallow containers. Slice roasts and whole turkeys into portion sizes and refrigerate or freeze in pans or platters. Items such as barbecue, chili, or stews should be cooled in shallow pans.
- 🔪 Marinate food in the refrigerator. Do not re-use the marinade. Instead, prepare a new recipe for basting or use as a dipping sauce.
- 🔪 Cook food thoroughly to destroy bacteria that might be present. The color of cooked meat and poultry is not a sign of its safety. The use of a thermometer is the only way to accurately determine that meat or poultry has reached a safe, minimum internal temperature of 165°F. The pink color in safely cooked meat and poultry may be due to a change in hemoglobin in tissues, when it is heated.
- 🔪 Thoroughly wash or scrub produce in running water before cutting or eating.



## Keeping Food Hot or Cold

There are limits to how long hot or cold food can be transported or held safely in coolers. Use only a sturdy, insulated cooler or thermos. Pack cold food with plenty of ice or frozen gel packs. To avoid cross-contamination, wrap foods well and store raw food separately from ready-to-eat-foods. Perishable foods should not be kept at a temperature above 40°F for more than two hours. When the outside temperature is 90°F or higher, food should be discarded after one hour. Delivered food should be kept hot or cold.

### **HOT**

food should be kept at 140°F or hotter until served. If an oven or stove is not available, keep food hot with a camping stove, propane gas grill, canned heat fuel surrounded by a strip of foil to act as a windbreak, or a charcoal grill. Have a thermometer handy that can easily be cleaned – and use it!

### **COLD**

food should be kept 40°F or colder until served. If a refrigerator or refrigerated truck that will keep the air temperature at 40°F or colder is not available, use commercially-prepared ice. Have an adequate supply of ice on hand. Use separate insulated coolers for holding raw foods, cooked food, prepared chilled foods, or beverages. Cover coolers with blankets and place them in the shade to help hold the cold temperature.

**Consider food safety as part of the normal routine of the occasional cook. The profit and the reputation of the organization you are trying to help may depend on your attention to food safety details!**

#### References

- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (August 2006). *How Temperatures Affect Foods.*
- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (September 2005). *Keep Hands Clean with Good Hygiene.*
- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (April 2001). *Seven Food Safety Steps for Successful Community Meals.*

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