

# Food safety in food aid activities

A close-up photograph of two hands, one from a person wearing an orange sleeve and the other from a person wearing a light-colored sweater, holding a brown paper bag. The bag is crumpled and appears to contain food. The background is blurred, showing more bags and some greenery.

**Stadin  
safka**

Helsinki



KIRKKO HELSINGISSÄ  
KYRKAN I HELSINGFORS

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# Food safety in food aid

All operators distributing food aid are subject to food control. Foods provided through food aid must be safe, and the responsibility for food safety lies with the food aid operators.

This guide brings together the key points of food legislation for food aid operators, as well as tips on food safety. More information on food legislation can be found via sources such as the Finnish Food Authority's website [www.ruokavirasto.fi](http://www.ruokavirasto.fi).

## **Good to know: Food Act and food safety**



The Food Act regulates all regular food operations. The legislation contains rules, instructions and requirements designed, among other things, to ensure the safe handling and quality of foods and protect the health of consumers.

Food safety refers to food handling, preparation and storage practices that reduce food-related hazards such as toxic compounds present in food naturally or due to exposure, harmful micro-organisms and foreign objects such as pieces of glass.



## Good to know: Hygiene passport

The hygiene passport is a certificate of food hygiene competence and is required for people working in food establishments such as cafés and restaurants. The hygiene passport is also required for food aid workers and volunteers who handle unpackaged and perishable foods. In addition to the hygiene passport, a certificate regarding the worker's state of health and potential salmonella infection is also required.

- Hygiene passports are issued by examiners approved by the Finnish Food Authority, and the passport is valid until further notice. A list of passport examiners and an electronic model test can be found on the Finnish Food Authority's website.
- Workers must obtain a hygiene passport no later than three months after starting their work. The three-month period also retroactively includes any previous work in the food industry for which a hygiene passport was required.
- The hygiene passport is subject to a fee, but unemployed jobseekers can ask about potentially obtaining a passport through the TE Office as a permit card to support employment.
- A health certificate regarding a potential salmonella infection can be obtained from health care services and does not always require a doctor's appointment. It is required when starting work and if there is reason to suspect that the worker is a carrier of salmonella.

## Things to remember when handling foods:

- Every operator (shop, industry, wholesaler, waste terminal, food aid distributor) is responsible for the food until it is handed over. Foods must always be edible and safe when handed over.
- Everyone is responsible for acting according to the rules/instructions provided.
- Always perform a sensory inspection of the quality of the product (e.g. appearance, smell, taste).
- At minimum, the customer must be informed of the name of the food and any ingredients causing allergies or intolerances, and provided with the necessary instructions for use and storage. If the information cannot be marked separately on each product, it can be provided orally and by means such a board placed in a visible location.
- The party organising the operation is responsible for ensuring that the workers and volunteers used have adequate food safety competence.

# Dates and shelf life of foods

The dates marked on foods indicate the date when the product is at its best (best before) or when the product must be used at the latest (expiry date). The operator must know these markings and also be able to tell the customer about them.

## **‘Best before’ date**

The ‘best before’ date is the date until which the food is guaranteed to be of good quality when stored according to the instructions provided on the packaging. After the ‘best before’ date, some quality-related changes may occur, such as drying or discolouration, which do not necessarily prevent the product from being used. Depending on the product, the shelf life left after the ‘best before’ date can range from days to weeks or longer if stored correctly. You can check the suitability for use by looking at, smelling and tasting the product.

**Products with a ‘best before’ date can be distributed in food aid even after the date has passed if the product is still usable.**

**Example:** Dairy products will keep for a few days or a week after the ‘best before’ date, whereas dry products can remain suitable for use for several months or even years.

## Expiry date

The expiry date is the date until which the food may be used.

The expiry date is marked on perishable foods that can pose a risk of food poisoning even after a short storage period.

- For a product that is past its expiry date, a sensory quality inspection is not reliable. The bacteria that cause food poisoning cannot be detected by the senses in such foods.
- A food item that is past its expiry date may not be handed out to consumers as such. It can be used to make food at a food aid point on the day after the expiry date, as long as the food is heated to at least 70 °C.
- The shelf life of products with an expiry date can be extended by freezing (see the next chapter).



**NOTE!** Products marked with an expiry date are usually meat and fish products or ready-to-eat foods. However, note that pre-chopped salads, vegetables and fruit, sprouts, unpasteurised milk and uncooked cheeses are also perishable products and marked with an expiry date!

**Example:** Ham slices with an expiry date of 10 November 2025 may not be served as such past the expiry date, e.g. on bread, or passed on. However, they can still be used on 11 November 2025 if they are used to prepare food at a food aid point, where they are heated to at least 70 °C.



## Good to know:

### Food poisoning

#### The main causes of food poisoning from food products are:

- Cold storage of the food takes place in too warm a temperature, allowing bacteria and moulds to multiply.
- The food has not been sufficiently heated, allowing bacteria, parasites or protozoa to survive.
- The cooling of hot food has been too slow.
- The most favourable temperature for the reproduction of dangerous microbes is +6 – +60 °C.

#### To prevent food poisoning

- wash your hands well before handling food;
- wash all vegetables and salads thoroughly with running water;
- wash any root vegetables with dirt on them separately from other products and clean the wash station after washing;
- always cut raw meat and fish on a separate cutting board;
- cook the food above 70 °C, poultry above 75 °C;
- ensure that the finished food is served at an appropriate temperature and properly cooled and reheated when re-served (see p. 15–17);
- heat foreign frozen berries to 90 °C for at least 2 minutes before serving;
- store food in a fridge at a temperature below 6 °C;
- adhere to the expiry dates of foods;
- keep your tools and work station clean.

**Remember  
the danger zone  
+6 – +60 °C!**



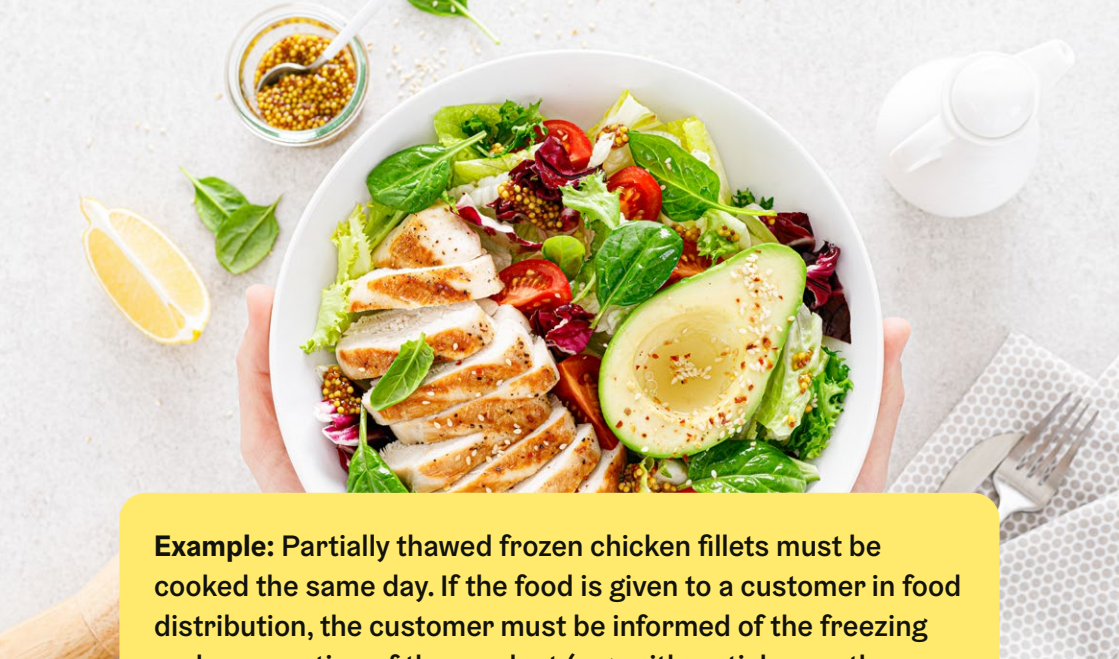
# Freezing

Freezing is a good way to prolong the shelf life of products, especially those with an expiry date, and to reduce food waste. In this guide, freezing has the same meaning as in legislation. In legislation, using a freezer is considered a specific form of freezing, but in colloquial language, freezing has become established as a broader term that covers the legal term 'freezing'.

## Extending the shelf life of a product by freezing

A food product may be frozen before the expiry date or on that date at the latest.

- Food that has been previously frozen and then thawed **MUST NOT** be refrozen. Refreezing is only allowed if previously frozen raw ingredients are used to prepare food by heating (above 70 °C). Refreezing is prohibited, as it significantly accelerates spoilage when thawing the food and increases the risk of food poisoning.
- A product frozen on the expiry date must be used or prepared for consumption immediately after thawing, on the same day in practice.
- When a product is frozen, it must be labelled (e.g. with a sticker) with information stating that the product has been frozen, that it must not be refrozen and that it must be used immediately. (Example: "Frozen on [date]. Do not refreeze. Use or prepare the product immediately.")
- A frozen product must be handed out to a customer as soon as possible and within two months at maximum. After a longer freezing period than that, the suitability of the food for use must be inspected (see page 11).



**Example:** Partially thawed frozen chicken fillets must be cooked the same day. If the food is given to a customer in food distribution, the customer must be informed of the freezing and preparation of the product (e.g. with a sticker on the packaging). A frozen, partially thawed product may not be refrozen, but after cooking, the finished food can be frozen immediately.



**NOTE!** Not all products are suitable for freezing, or different foods may have different practices. For example, due to the severe risk of disease caused by listeria, freezing cold smoked or cured fish packaged in a vacuum or modified atmosphere beyond the expiry date is only allowed if the food aid operator prepares food with the thawed fish by heating it above 70 °C on the same day as quickly as possible. Such frozen fish products may not be handed to a customer uncooked as food aid.



## Effect of freezing on the shelf life of foods

Freezing can prolong the shelf life of a product, but long-term storage in particular can alter its properties, and not all products are suitable for freezing. Long-term freezer storage has the most significant impact on the sensory quality of the product, such as the freshness of fat, texture, taste, tenderness, colour and nutrition.

- Low-fat foods will keep longer in a freezer.
- Freezing does not destroy bacteria or viruses in food, but rather leaves them dormant in the frozen product.
- A thawed product is quicker to spoil, as the thawing process releases nutrients that are good for bacteria. Therefore, any thawed products must be eaten or used for cooking soon after thawing (immediately for products frozen on the expiry date).
- Freezing should be done as quickly as possible, but make sure not to freeze too much at once.



## Distributing and serving food safely

A safe food distribution system ensures that the temperatures and packaging of foods, hygiene and the smoothness and quality of service are in order. It is essential that all staff know the agreed upon procedures for the hygienic handling and distribution of food and are also able to guide customers.

Persons who handle unpackaged and perishable food must obtain a hygiene passport.

## Food distribution

In food distribution (including the distribution of individual food products or food bags, for example), food is handed out for people to take home, either in pre-packed food bags or as products for customers to select themselves. Food distribution can also coincide with other activities, such as a meal or group activity.

- Foods must be kept on a distribution table or similar surface that is easy to keep clean and protected against pests, moisture, dust, heat, light and other factors.
- Foods or food boxes must not be stored on an uncovered floor.
- Products requiring cold storage must be distributed quickly or in a staggered manner to prevent the temperature of the products from rising. Take products out of the cold gradually or use heat-insulating boxes and cold mats to help.
- It is recommended that you monitor the temperatures of cold products by spot checks during distribution.
- If packaged products are repackaged, e.g. into smaller containers, the products must be marked with at least the most important details (the name of the product, content, the 'best before' or expiry date, the manufacture date of portioned meals, the most common allergens) and the packaging materials must be food-grade. Packaging materials intended for food use are marked with the international glass and fork symbol or the words 'safe for food use'.
- Frozen products must be marked with the date of freezing and other relevant details (see page 9).





**Example:** Pallets and trolleys are suitable for items such as boxes containing meat or bananas. When the boxes are not on the floor, no contaminants such as sand, glass fragments or dust can end up in the food through the bottom when the boxes are moved.



**NOTE!** In warm summer weather, people receiving food should be reminded of the cold chain. It is important to refrigerate any food waste products that are perishable and near the end of their shelf life soon after receiving them.

## Preparing food

Food prepared by a food aid operator themselves can be served to customers on site or packaged in takeaway portion boxes. The serving of food is subject to food safety regulations, some of which feature certain concessions for food aid.

- Food served hot must be kept at a minimum temperature of +60 °C.
- Food served cold (e.g. salads) must be kept at 6 °C, or if the serving period is no longer than four hours, the temperature can be allowed to reach 12 °C.
- At least the name of the product and any ingredients causing allergies and intolerances must be indicated for the food, e.g. on a piece of paper during serving. There is no obligation to declare the country of origin of any meat used in the preparation of food in food aid operations.
- Takeaway food is to be served either hot (above 60 °C) or cold (below 6 °C).
- Any leftover food can be served one more time, e.g. the next day, as long as the food has been carefully cooled and reheated.
- Leftover food can also be given to customers if hot food was kept at 60 °C or hotter and cold food was kept below 6 °C for the duration of the service. The food can be distributed immediately while any hot food is hot and cold food is cold, or the food can be cooled rapidly (to 6 °C within 4 hours).

## Serving ready-to-eat waste food

Ready-to-eat food that has been received as waste, such as leftover food from a school canteen or a lunch restaurant line, can be served in food aid to be eaten on site or in a portion box for customers to take home cold, provided that it meets the following conditions:

- the food appears impeccable based on a sensory inspection;
- the cold/hot chain has been taken care of at all stages;
- hot food has been kept at a temperature of at least +60 °C throughout the serving period;
- cold food, such as salads or cold cuts, has been kept at a maximum temperature of +6 °C throughout the serving period.

Hot food previously served on a restaurant line can be served in food aid three different ways:

1. The food is transported chilled: The food is quickly cooled in the kitchen (to 6 °C in less than four hours) and transported cold to the food aid operator, who either reheats the food to at least 70 °C and serves it on site or distributes it cold for customers to take home.
2. The food is transported warm and refrigerated by the food aid operator for further use: The food is transported warm and cooled immediately upon arrival in a cooling cabinet. The transport and cooling down to 6 °C must take place within four hours. The food can then be used further the same way as in section 1. Note that cooling requires a separate cooling cabinet that facilitates rapid cooling.
3. The food is transported warm and served immediately: The food is transported so that it stays warm and is served immediately. The food must be served very soon after it has been delivered from the line and cannot be refrigerated or reused after serving in food aid.



- The food must be provided with the necessary details (e.g. name of the product, date, the most common allergens). Make sure that the person eating the food has access to this information, e.g. on a piece of paper where the food is served or by asking the staff.
- Staff handling meal service waste must have a hygiene pass.
- Before heating the food, a sensory inspection must be carried out to ensure that the food is impeccable and suitable for consumption.
- The food is heated to over +70 °C before serving and the temperature is checked with a thermometer suitable for food.
- Both hot and cold food are to be served as quickly as possible, as the sooner the food is consumed, the lower the risks.
- Food received as waste from a restaurant line may only be served once. Any food that is heated but not eaten during the serving period must be disposed of properly.
- Hot food that has been served and has been properly cooled immediately after being served (see page 16) may be frozen for food aid the day after being served and cooled, as long as the cold chain is not broken at any point before freezing begins and freezing begins immediately after receipt. Remember to clearly mark the freezing date on the products!

# Staff hygiene

- The clothing worn by staff must be clean and appropriate for the nature of the work.
- The premises must have hand-washing facilities with running water and liquid soap, as well as disinfectant and disposable hand towels if necessary.
- When handling non-packaged perishable foods, any wounds, false nails or nail extensions, and jewellery (e.g. rings, earrings and other piercings) are prohibited unless they can be covered with protective equipment (e.g. disposable gloves, hair protectors, face masks).
- Hand hygiene is particularly important when handling food: the hands (including when wearing gloves) must be kept clean and washed regularly, or disposable gloves must be changed sufficiently frequently.
- Unpackaged foods must only be touched with clean hands or gloves.
- If no hand washing facilities are available, disposable disinfectant wipes suitable for food use may be used as an alternative when handling packaged foods.
- A person known to or suspected of carrying a food-borne disease must not handle any foods. For example, if a person has febrile diarrhoea or symptoms of a stomach bug after a trip abroad, or a family member of theirs is found to have salmonella, that person must not handle any foods. Instead, they must contact their health station.



## **Good to know: Use of disposable gloves**



Make sure that any disposable gloves used are food-safe (marked with the glass and fork symbol or other indication of appropriateness for food use). Hands must be washed and dried before putting on disposable gloves. Remember not to handle any products eaten fresh (e.g. salad) with the same disposable gloves as perishable foods such as raw minced meat or raw fish. Similarly, you must change or remove the gloves and wash your hands after touching your face or mobile phone or other unclean surfaces.

# Storage and transport of foods

Foods must be stored in appropriate facilities that are easy to keep clean and cannot be accessed by pests, such as rats and birds.

Foods must be packed only into clean transport boxes, containers and tanks. Make sure that the transport aids do not get dirty during storage. Cold facilities must be cleaned regularly.

Place and keep waste collection bins so that they do not cause odours or other health hazards. Make sure that no animals can get into the waste bins.

## Inspecting the condition of foods

Everyone who handles foods has a responsibility and a duty to ensure that the food is safe when handed out. When foods are delivered to a food aid operator, responsibility for food safety is also transferred to the operator.

The condition of food products should be inspected upon receipt, when stored and when the product is about to be handed over to a customer or used to prepare food.



### **Inspect:**

- ✓ Sensory quality: for example, is there mould on the product, does the product smell bad?
- ✓ Date and packaging information: products past their 'best before' date can be received, but their condition must be inspected.
- ✓ Condition of packages: make sure that the product is not spoiled due to packaging breakage and that the packaging provides all the necessary information.
- ✓ Temperature of perishable and frozen foods: the temperature of foods requiring hot or cold storage should be inspected with spot-checks when receiving such products.



## Storage of foods

Food prepared by a food aid operator themselves can be served to customers on site or packaged in takeaway portion boxes. The serving of food is subject to food safety regulations, some of which feature certain concessions for food aid.

- Please note that temperatures in a refrigerator or other cold storage devices may vary in different parts of the device. For example, refrigerator manuals often indicate recommended locations for different foods.
- When stocking storage and refrigeration equipment, pay attention to the date markings of the products and place the products so that those with the shortest shelf life are in the front.
- The contents of the cold storage device should be checked daily and any unusable products must be removed. For example, mould can spread rapidly from one infected fruit to others.
- Foods must be stored so that they do not absorb any odours or flavours from the environment.
- If other goods are stored in the same facility, it must be ensured that they do not compromise food safety.

## Storage temperatures of foods

Fresh fishery products, prepared fishery products, processed fishery products packaged in a vacuum or modified atmosphere and salted roe: at

**0 – +3 °C**

Minced meat and liver: at no higher than

**+4 °C**

Dairy products that have been at least pasteurised or similarly treated: at no higher than

**+8 °C**

All other perishable foods (including milk, cream, sprouts and chopped vegetables): at no higher than

**+6 °C**

Foods prepared by heating that have not been chilled: at least at

**+60 °C**

Frozen foods and ice cream: at

**-18 °C**

For a brief period: at

**-15 °C**



**NOTE!** Appropriate refrigeration equipment must be available for products requiring cold storage. The temperature of cold storage equipment, i.e. refrigerators, freezers and cold rooms, must be constantly monitored and recorded regularly. This makes it easier to spot any issues such as equipment malfunctions. Pay attention to the filling rate: the cold storage device must not be overfilled.





## **Transport and the cold chain**

When transporting food, special care must be taken to avoid breaking the cold chain and compromising the quality of the food. The cold chain means keeping the food temperature sufficiently low during transport.

- Keep all transport vehicles and containers clean.
- Clean the transport compartment thoroughly every day. If you use the compartment to transport other goods, clean it before transporting foods.
- Try to pack the products so that they will not be broken or dented during transport.
- No foreign odours or flavours or harmful substances may end up in the foods during transport.
- The temperatures of foods requiring cold storage must be maintained during transport. If no refrigerated vehicle is available, ice boxes can be used for transport.





- However, short-term deviations (up to 3 °C for no longer than 24 h) in the temperatures of perishable cold foods due to practical reasons can be allowed if they do not pose a health risk.
- Particular attention must be paid to the transport of foods during summer.
- The temperature of the refrigeration device usually needs to be set slightly below the required level to ensure that the temperature is low enough across the refrigeration device and that the food remains cold enough.
- Ensure that all refrigeration devices (e.g. cold rooms, fridges, freezers, refrigerated vehicles) are in good condition, check and calibrate their thermometers regularly and do not exceed the filling limit of the device.

# Regulatory control of food aid activities

All food aid operators are obliged to submit a food premises notification, i.e. to inform the municipal food control authority of the activities and the premises used. A food premises notification must be submitted even if the food distribution activity only involves handing out dry products or waste food is only served as a snack in connection with other activities.

- You can submit a food premises notification via the electronic notification service a [ilppa.fi](https://ilppa.fi) (in Finnish) or by contacting your municipal food control authority. Instructions on submitting a notification are provided both in the Ilppa service and by your municipal food control authority.
- The notification must be submitted four weeks before the start of the activities.
- Food aid operators are not regularly visited by food inspectors, but all operators handling perishable food undergo an initial inspection at the start of their activities. Inspections may also be carried out later if there are shortcomings in the activities or the food inspectors consider it necessary.



## **In-house control plan**

An in-house control plan must also be attached to the food premises notification, serving as the basis for the self-monitoring of activities. The in-house control plan is a free-form description of the operational processes and how various food safety risks are identified and managed. There are various in-house control plan templates and guidelines for food operations available online that can be used as a starting point for developing an in-house control plan. You can also ask your municipal food control authorities for advice or a template.

The in-house control plan must contain information such as:

- Where will foods be received from?
- Who will be responsible for transporting the food?
- How are the conditions for transporting and storing foods?
- How will foods be used or distributed?
- How will the foods received be inspected upon arrival?
- What types of food will be involved, e.g. will there be foods that can be stored at room temperature, foods that require temperature control, or both?
- Will packaged foods, non-packaged foods or both be distributed as food aid?
- Will the activities involve processing foods, e.g. preparing them into meals?

- Will foods be frozen?
- Will packages be divided into smaller units?
- Who will handle the food and will they have a hygiene pass and health certificate regarding salmonella infection, if needed?
- How will the familiarisation of staff and volunteers involved in the food aid activities be ensured?
- How will the operator ensure that after the 'best before' date, the food is still safe and fit for human consumption? E.g. by opening the packaging and carrying out a sensory (appearance, smell and taste) inspection before distribution.
- How will it be ensured in the preparation of food that the most common ingredients and products causing allergies and intolerances are kept separate and cross-contamination is controlled?
- A cleaning plan for the premises and equipment.
- The procedures for monitoring the temperature of refrigeration devices.

## More information

More information on food safety is available via sources such as the Finnish Food Safety Authority's website [www.ruokavirasto.fi](https://www.ruokavirasto.fi).

The information presented in this guide was reviewed in December 2024 and is in line with the legislation and guidelines in force at the time.

## Useful instructions

Finnish Food Authority: Foodstuffs donated to food aid.

<https://www.ruokavirasto.fi/elintarvikkeet/oppaat/ruoka-apuohje/ruoka-apu--ohje/> (in Finnish)

Finnish Food Authority: Handling of unpackaged, easily perishable foodstuffs in a food establishment: when an employee is required to have a hygiene passport or provide a health status statement for salmonella infection. 17 June 2021.

## Sources

Finnish Food Authority

[Ruokatieto.fi](https://ruokatieto.fi)

City of Helsinki Food Safety Unit

Stadin safka is an activity of the City of Helsinki and the Parish Union of Helsinki that involves cooperating with food aid operators to develop food aid in Helsinki and utilise waste food for the benefit of people.

[hel.fi/stadinsafka](https://hel.fi/stadinsafka)

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**More than food aid**

