

 West Lothian Council	Environmental Health		SUBJECT: DEFROSTING FOOD SAFELY
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Information Sheet FH15

DEFROSTING FOOD SAFELY

Introduction

Correct defrosting of frozen food is important. Mistakes can mean that food does not cook properly, or that bacteria can be spread to other food. Incorrect defrosting is a common cause of food poisoning. This Information Sheet looks at how to avoid the most frequent problems.

Why is it necessary?

Unless the instructions for the food say "Cook from frozen", it is essential that frozen foods are defrosted thoroughly before being cooked. If ice is still present in the middle then the food will not cook properly.

For example, a common cause of Salmonella food poisoning is the cooking of poultry before it has been thoroughly defrosted. Even if the poultry has been cooked for the right length of time, a great deal of heat is used to melt the remaining ice in the middle. The temperature in the centre of the bird never gets high enough to kill the bacteria, and can actually help them to grow even faster.

Safe Defrosting

It is best to defrost food in the fridge. This stops the outside of the food becoming warm enough for bacteria to grow. This is particularly important when defrosting cooked food.

The juice that comes out of defrosting raw food can carry large amounts of bacteria. Defrosting raw foods should always be kept at the bottom of the fridge, to prevent any juice dripping on to other foods.

If you cannot defrost in the fridge, then the process still has to be done safely. Just leaving the food out in a warm room can be dangerous and allow bacteria to grow to very large numbers. There are a number of ways you can make the process safer.

- For pre-packed food, always read and follow any instructions for defrosting.
- Use the defrost programme of your microwave. This does not work so well on large blocks of frozen food.

- Place defrosting meat in a container so that juices can drain away but will not drip on to other foods or work surfaces.
- Put the food in a cool but well ventilated place such as a larder or dry goods store.
- Unless the food is still in its packaging, cover it to protect it whilst defrosting.
- Still be careful to keep raw and cooked foods well apart to prevent cross contamination.
- Remove giblets from poultry as soon as possible.
- The area used for defrosting may be heavily contaminated with bacteria, and must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected as soon as possible. **See information sheet FH06**
- Make sure the centre of meat or poultry is completely thawed. Use a probe thermometer to measure the temperature.

Remember – Best practice dictates that food should be defrosted in a refrigerator. Do not leave food lying out at room temperature overnight to defrost.

Defrosting using a Microwave.

Most microwaves are not particularly good at defrosting food. Since the temperature of the food is raised quickly, the outside will defrost first and begin to cook while the remainder of the food is still defrosting. If you wish to use a microwave to defrost food, here are some simple rules to follow:

- Follow the manufacturers' instructions on defrosting.
- It is best to use a microwave that is designed for defrosting and has programmable settings. The best types should also be weight sensitive to the food you are defrosting. If you intend to defrost often, then try to get a commercial grade microwave.
- If the microwave is a domestic type and has the normal defrost setting, only defrost smaller amounts. Thin packs of food work best.
- Use a probe-thermometer to check that the food has been thoroughly defrosted. We would recommend not using the same thermometer for raw foods as for ready to eat foods. **See information sheet FH21**

The Two Golden Rules

1. Remember, it is better and safer to defrost frozen meat and poultry in the fridge, away from cooked food. Then make sure that it is completely thawed before cooking.
2. After touching frozen or thawed raw meat or poultry – WASH YOUR HANDS!

Further help

Remember it is your responsibility to ensure that the food served to your customers is safe. If you would like help, or need any further advice, then please contact us on 01506 280000 or environmentalhealth@westlothian.gov.uk