

Guidelines for the Distribution of Donated Foods



Purpose of These Guidelines

These guidelines are intended for food facilities that distribute donated food to the public (i.e., food banks, soup kitchens, etc.). Complying with the following requirements will help ensure that the food distributed by your organization is safe for your clients.

Food Facility Requirements

General

1. All food distributed by the food facility must be safe, wholesome and handled in a manner that will prevent foodborne illness and the transmission of disease.
2. All facilities in which food intended for public consumption is stored, prepared, processed, distributed or served must possess a Food Handling Permit issued by Alberta Health Services.
3. Food facilities must be maintained in a clean and sanitary condition at all times.
4. In commercial food establishments where there are 5 or fewer food handlers working on the premises, at least one person who has care and control of the food establishment (e.g. owner, manager) must hold a certificate in food sanitation and hygiene.
5. In commercial food establishments where there are 6 or more food handlers, at least one member of the management or supervising staff must hold a certificate in food sanitation and hygiene and must be present at the food establishment at that time.
6. It is recommended that as many food handlers as possible complete a course in food safety. The Food Sanitation and Hygiene Training Course offered by Alberta Health Services meets this requirement.



Interior Finishes and Cleanup Equipment

Interior Finishes

The floors, walls and ceilings in areas where open food is handled must be easily cleanable.

Cleanup Equipment

1. Facilities in which foods are prepared and/or served to the public (i.e. soup kitchens) must be equipped with
 - a) A hand-wash sink in the food preparation area,
AND either
 - b) A two-compartment sink if single-service utensils are to be used (i.e. paper plates, plastic forks/knives/spoons, disposable cups), OR
 - c) If re-usable utensils are to be used (ie. silverware, glasses, dishes, etc.):
 - i. A three-compartment sink in the food preparation area, OR
 - ii. an approved commercial dishwasher, plus a two-compartment sink in the food preparation area.
2. Facilities where food is stored and distributed to the public (i.e. food banks) must be equipped with:
 - a) a two-compartment sink, if foods are re-packaged or re-portioned in the facility (e.g. re-portioning bulk food items into smaller containers), OR
 - b) a supply of hot and cold running water somewhere in the premises, if no open food is handled in the facility.



Food Equipment and Food Containers

1. Food Equipment
 - a) All food equipment in the facility must be maintained in good repair, in proper working order and in a clean and sanitary condition at all times.
2. Refrigeration Equipment
 - a) Coolers must maintain foods at temperatures below 4°C (40°F).
 - b) Freezers must be able to keep foods frozen preferably at temperatures below –18°C (0°F).
3. Food Containers
 - a) Only clean containers specifically designed for food storage should be used to store food. Stainless steel pans, aluminum foil pans and food grade plastic containers may be used (e.g. ice cream pails, vegetable oil pails).
 - b) Containers must be free of cracks or defects that may make them difficult to properly clean.
 - c) Containers must be thoroughly washed, rinsed and sanitized between uses.
 - d) Aluminum foil pans and other containers that are not easily cleanable cannot be re-used.
4. Food contact surfaces (e.g. countertops, cutting board) must be smooth and constructed of easily cleanable material (e.g., arborite, stainless steel).



Donated Foods Guidelines

The following should be used as a guide in determining whether a particular donated food should be accepted or distributed.

Low-risk foods are foods which will not support the growth of pathogenic micro-organisms (i.e. dry foods, unopened commercially canned foods, whole fresh fruits and vegetables, baked goods without perishable fillings, etc.,).



High-risk foods are foods which will support the growth of pathogenic micro-organisms (i.e. meat, poultry, seafood and seafood products, dairy products, soups, sauces, gravies, eggs and egg products, baked goods with perishable fillings, etc.,).



A. Acceptable Foods

1. Low-risk food items including:
 - commercially canned foods
 - whole fruits & vegetables (home grown vegetables are acceptable)
 - dry goods (e.g., cereal, crackers, pancake mix etc.,)

All other foods accepted by food banks/soup kitchens must come directly from an approved premise (i.e., a facility which has been issued a Food Handling Permit by Alberta Health Services).

2. Both high-risk and low-risk foods donated directly from premises which have a Food Handling Permit can be distributed by the food bank/soup kitchen, provided the food meets all the requirements set out in this guideline.
3. Donated ready-to-eat cooked foods (e.g. surplus foods from restaurants) may be distributed if:
 - a) the product is not leftover food from a patron's table,
 - b) the product has been maintained below 4°C (40°F) or above 60°C (140°F) and protected from contamination at all times, and
 - c) the age of the product does not exceed the requirements set out for high-risk foods in this guideline.
 - d) the product has been transported to and from the food bank in a manner described in this guideline.

B. Unacceptable Foods

The following **must not be distributed** by food banks/soup kitchens:

1. High-risk foods obtained from premises without a valid Food Handling Permit.
2. High-risk food which has been held at unsafe temperatures (i.e., between 4°C and 60°C).
3. Unacceptable canned foods including:
 - a) foods in bulging, rusty, leaking or severely dented cans,
 - b) cans without labels, unless there is reliable assurance as to the contents of the can,
 - c) canned infant formula after the expiry date on the can,
 - d) home-canned foods, and
 - e) home-processed fruits or vegetables (e.g. jam, pickles, blanched vegetables).
4. Food which has been contaminated by insects, rodents or chemicals.



5. Meat and poultry which have not been inspected; these are not to be kept in or distributed by food facilities. Meat and poultry must be inspected by a Government Meat Inspector prior to receipt of the product. If there are any doubts whether meat or poultry products have been inspected, either do not accept the product, or hold the product and contact your local health inspector.

Wild game meat is permitted if received through a program approved by Alberta Health Services. "Hunters Who Care" is one such program.

6. Donated fish products not caught under a commercial license.
7. Eggs which are leaking, cracked or visibly dirty.

Food Handling Procedures

A. Temperature Requirements for High-Risk Foods

It is essential that high-risk foods are maintained at safe temperatures to prevent the growth of food poisoning bacteria in food.

1. Keep high-risk and potentially hazardous foods either refrigerated or frozen. Refrigerated foods must be held at a temperature of 4°C (40°F) or lower. Frozen foods must remain frozen preferably held at a temperature of -18°C (0°F) or lower. Use clean probe thermometers to check food temperatures.
2. Ideally, hot high-risk foods should be cooled to less than 4°C (40°F) prior to transport to the facility.

However, if foods are received hot, they should be immediately refrigerated and rapidly chilled to 4°C (40°F) or lower within two hours of receipt.



B. Shelf-life of High-Risk Foods

It is important that high-risk foods received by the facility be distributed quickly to minimize the likelihood of spoilage or growth of disease-causing bacteria in the food.

Non-frozen ready-to-eat high-risk foods must be consumed within **72 hours** from the time of preparation/production, whether the food was prepared in another food facility, or in the food bank/soup kitchen.

C. Best Before Dates/Expiry Dates

1. Canned infant formula cannot be distributed after the expiry date on the container.
2. Best before dates on other foods (e.g. fluid milk, yogurt, meat, cheese, salad dressing, etc.) are normally dates after which the manufacturer cannot assure optimal quality of the product. Consult with the manufacturer of the food to ensure the product is safe if it is distributed after the expiry/ best before date.

D. General Food Handling Guidelines

1. Keep foods covered/wrapped while in storage.
2. Ensure that raw foods do not contaminate cooked foods, either directly by contact or indirectly (e.g. by letting meat juices drip on other foods during transportation or storage).
3. Thaw frozen foods in a refrigerator or as part of the cooking process. Microwave ovens may be used for thawing provided the product is subject to cooking or re-heating immediately thereafter.
4. Foods that are to be served hot must be reheated rapidly to an internal temperature of at least 74°C (165°F) prior to serving. Use a thermometer to check temperatures and sanitize the thermometer after use.

E. Staff

All volunteers and staff who handle food must maintain a high standard of personal cleanliness, and wear clean outer garments. They must wash their hands frequently, i.e. at the start of the shift, after breaks, after using the toilet, and after handling raw meat or poultry. Volunteers and staff should not smoke, drink or eat in areas where food is being handled or stored.



F. Storage/Handling of Low-Risk Foods

1. Low-risk foods must be stored:
 - a) in a clean, well-lit area, and
 - b) in a manner that will facilitate easy cleaning and inspection.
2. Bulk low-risk foods may be re-packaged or re-portioned onsite, if:
 - a) it is re-packaged into food-grade containers, and
 - b) if the original food packaging has been damaged, the product is inspected to ensure the product is not contaminated.
3. Shelf-life of low-risk foods
In general, the “first in – first out” rule for stock rotation should be applied. For optimal food quality, follow the suggested guidelines for the shelf-life of various types of low-risk foods listed in Appendix A.

Transportation Guidelines

The following procedures are required during transport of food to the food facility.

1. Keep perishable foods either refrigerated or frozen while in transport.
2. Transport time for perishable foods should not exceed one hour if not in a refrigerated vehicle. High-risk foods must be refrigerated at or below 4°C (40°F) or kept frozen preferably at –18°C (0°F) or lower before transporting foods to other facilities.
3. Ensure that food transport vehicles and food transport containers are maintained in a clean and sanitary condition.

Receiver/Shipping Guidelines

The following procedures are recommended:

1. Inspect all foods upon arrival at the food facility to ensure that all products comply with these guidelines. Foods that do not comply must be discarded immediately.
2. Keep detailed and accurate records of donated products received from other food facilities. These records should include date and time of receipt, product description, and origin of product (name and address). For ready-to-eat foods (e.g. buffet leftovers) date of production should also be recorded.
3. Do not accept improperly refrigerated, packaged or labeled foods.
4. Check that there is sufficient acceptable storage space at the receiving location before accepting foods.
5. Place food requiring refrigeration in a refrigerator or freezer immediately upon receipt.
6. Care must be taken to ensure the refrigerator or freezer is not overloaded to allow for proper air circulation.

Adapted from [The Winnipeg & Victoria Surplus Food Program Guideline](#)

Appendix A: Recommended Storage Periods for Low-Risk Foods

A. Fruits

Fruit	Recommended Storage Temperature (°C)	Recommended Storage Period
Apples	4 – 7	2 weeks
Citrus Fruits	4 – 7	1 month
Plums	4 – 7	1 week
Other Fruits	4 – 7	2 to 5 days

B. Vegetables

Vegetable	Recommended Storage Temperature (°C)	Recommended Storage Period
Potatoes	7 – 10	30 days
Mature onions, turnips, hard-rind squashes	16	3 months (2 weeks at room temperature)
Other Vegetables	4 – 7	5 days

C. Dry Goods

Food	Recommended Storage Period
Bottled salad dressings, mayonnaise (unopened)	2 months
Cereals (ready-to-eat), cookies, crackers	6 months
Prepared mixes (e.g. pancake mix)	6 months
Canned Foods	1 year
Flour (bleached)	1 year

Adapted from The Educational Foundation of the National Restaurant Association (1995). Servsafe Serving Safe Food Certification Course Bookpp. 174 -178

Contact us at 1-833-476-4743 or [submit a request online](#) at ahs.ca/eph.

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