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## Do you cook and bring food to an elderly relative or friend in an aged care facility?

This fact sheet has been kindly sponsored by Compass Group (Australia) as a service to aged care facilities.

It's really nice to show you care by cooking special favourite meals for the resident of an aged care facility — perhaps culturally specific food or a family favourite which is not normally available in that facility.

But if you do, you really wouldn't want to make them sick, so there are some things you need to know.

Our immune systems get weaker as we get older. Also our stomachs produce less acid which makes it easier for harmful germs to get through the digestive system and invade our bodies.

If elderly people do get food poisoning, they are also likely to suffer more severe consequences. These can range from mild dehydration to neuromuscular dysfunction or even death. Older people also take longer than most of us to recover from food poisoning.

There are some foods that pose a higher risk than others, particularly of passing on a Listeria infection which is dangerous for the elderly.

### What are the higher risk foods?

Cold meats	Cooked or uncooked, packaged or unpackaged eg roast beef, ham etc.
Cold cooked chicken	Purchased whole, portions, sliced or diced
Pate	Refrigerated pate, liverwurst or meat spreads
Salads	Pre-prepared or pre-packaged fruit, vegetables or salads eg from salad bars, retail outlets etc.
Chilled seafood	Raw or smoked ready-to-eat eg oysters, sashimi or sushi, smoked salmon or trout, sandwich fillings, pre-cooked peeled prawns such as in prawn cocktails and salads
Cheese	Pre-packaged and delicatessen soft, semi soft and surface ripened cheeses eg brie, camembert, ricotta, feta and blue
Ice cream	Soft serve
Other dairy products	Unpasteurised dairy products eg raw goats milk, cheese or yoghurt made from raw milk

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Foods made with raw egg such as home-made egg mayonnaise, hollandaise sauce, uncooked cakes and desserts and egg-nog can also be dangerous for the elderly.

### **You should not provide these foods to an elderly resident**

The elderly person may also have special dietary requirements or restrictions of which you are unaware. Please check with the staff before providing food to an elderly resident.

### **What precautions should I take when preparing foods?**

There are no special rules for cooking for elderly people — you just need to be even fussier than normal. If you plan to take chilled or frozen food you have cooked yourself, make sure that the food is cooled quickly in your refrigerator; never at room temperature. Always wash your hands well under running water using soap and dry thoroughly before handling food. You can get information on preparing food safely from the fact sheet 'Protecting Tiny Tummies and Sensitive Systems' and other fact sheets on the Food Safety Information Council website, [www.foodsafety.asn.au](http://www.foodsafety.asn.au).

### **How can I transport food safely for an elderly person?**

You will need to transport your food to the aged care facility so take care that it is protected from contamination during transport and, if it is chilled food, it is kept cool or if you are taking it hot, you keep it hot during the journey.

Food should be kept at 5 degrees Celsius or cooler or, for hot food, at 60 degrees Celsius or hotter. Between 5 and 60 degrees is known as the temperature danger zone because harmful bacteria multiply to dangerous levels in food when it is kept between these temperatures.

Put cold food into a cooler with ice packs when travelling to visit your relative or friend. Don't pack food if it has just been cooked and is still warm. Coolers cannot cool food they can only keep cold food cool. Always cover pre-prepared foods securely and prechill them, for example, keep in the refrigerator overnight. Other perishable foods and drinks, such as deli products, cooked chicken and dairy products must also be cold when put in the cooler.

Hot food is difficult to keep hot and is best avoided if you are travelling long distances. It is best to chill the food overnight and reheat it at the residence. If you must take hot food on a longer journey, an insulated jug, preheated with boiling water before being filled with the steaming hot food, can be used. If you are unsure whether the jug will keep the food above 60 degrees Celsius, try filling it with water at 90 degrees Celsius, seal and test the water temperature after the length of time you expect your journey to take. If it is still above 60 degrees then you can use the jug. You will need a food thermometer to do this test.

If any perishable food you bring is not eaten immediately, make sure it is refrigerated before you leave.

## **Reheating food**

Different aged care facilities will have different rules about reheating food provided by friends or relatives. In some, staff will reheat the food, in others, staff are not permitted to do so. In some facilities, the elderly person can reheat the food themselves, in others the person providing the food must do the reheating.

Check with the staff to find out the rules in that facility. Make sure that staff know that you have brought in food and ask them how to go about re-heating it.

Food needs to be reheated to a minimum of 75 degrees Celsius or 70 degrees Celsius for two minutes to kill any bacteria or viruses that might be present in the food.

## **Reheating food in a microwave oven**

If you are reheating food in a microwave, you need to be especially careful that the food is heated evenly.

Food heated in a microwave oven does not heat uniformly and unwanted germs may survive in portions of poorly heated food.

Manufacturers recommend standing times to help alleviate the problem of uneven heating. Many microwaveable meal packs carry the instruction to stir the food part way through the cooking process. Items such as lasagne that can't be stirred should be allowed standing time to allow the whole product to reach a uniform temperature.

How evenly the food will heat will also depend on the thickness of portions and on the composition and moisture content of the food.

Frozen food needs to be completely thawed before reheating.

If you are reheating a commercially prepared food, read and follow all the manufacturer's microwaving instructions.

## **Storage of the food you bring in**

If some or all of any perishable food you have provided is not eaten immediately, tell the staff and ask them about storing the food in a refrigerator.

Some elderly people like to keep extra food in their rooms in drawers or bedside tables for eating later. Whilst this is an acceptable practice for shelf stable foods like cakes, biscuits and chocolates, this can be very risky with perishable food such as cold meats, custard or cream filled cakes and cooked vegetables and meat dishes. Leaving perishable food in the temperature danger zone for too long before being eaten can result in foodborne illness. Food which can cause food poisoning may not look or taste spoiled.

Sometimes elderly people can also forget how long the food has been there.

### **If you bring an unopened package of commercially prepared food**

Make sure the elderly person is aware of any 'best before' or 'use by' date on the food package.

**Make sure you tell the staff if the elderly person has some perishable food in their room.**

#### ***Remember:***

**When you bring food into an aged care facility for a relative or friend it is you and not the staff who is responsible for its safety.**

If you are cooking for an elderly person, please check the fact sheet 'Protecting Tiny Tummies and Sensitive Systems' under 'publications' on the Food Safety Information Council's website [www.foodsafety.asn.au](http://www.foodsafety.asn.au) for more information on preparing food safely.

#### ***Need more information?***

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