

Safe Vacuum Packing

Guidance Notes for Butchers, Small Caterers and Retailers

Introduction

Vacuum packing, i.e. the removal of air, has become increasingly popular as a method of extending the shelf life of food products without adversely affecting the quality. It is a highly effective way of preventing food spoilage, but can create conditions which may lead to the survival and growth of certain harmful bacteria, namely *Clostridium botulinum* and *Listeria monocytogenes*.

These bacteria can not only grow without air but at cold temperatures as low as 0°C and if allowed to reach certain levels can be fatal.

This short guidance note has been produced for butchers and small caterers/retailers to give advice on good practice when vacuum packing foods to avoid such dangers. Food producers wanting more detailed information and/or vacuum packing food for a shelf life longer than 10 days, are recommended to get expert advice (see further information).

Legal Requirements (in bold) and Good Practice Notes

1. **The risks associated with the vacuum packing process must be considered and written procedures made and implemented to protect customers from harmful bacteria (known as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) procedures)**
2. All products that are going to be vacuum packed must be as fresh as possible, and preferably have not been kept for several days prior to packing.
3. Make sure all equipment, eg slicing machines, knives, in direct contact with the food products is thoroughly cleaned and disinfected, ie a hot soapy water clean followed by a suitable anti-bacterial rinse/ spray. The vacuum packing machine must be thoroughly cleaned after use and in between using it for raw and ready to eat food. Care must be taken to clean hidden areas that provide breeding grounds for germs.

Ideally separate vacuum packing machines should be used for raw and cooked foods, especially when large numbers of products are being packed.

4. Where possible, make sure direct handling of the food is kept to a minimum. Staff should wash their hands thoroughly prior to handling food.

5. Make sure the vacuum packing machine is working properly and is well maintained – it is helpful to keep documentation of any maintenance checks carried out.
6. Bags approved for vacuum packing should be used and stored in a clean, dry environment.
7. Vacuum Packing is not recommended for raw meat aged on the bone because it is more likely to discolour. It is best done shortly after slaughter.
8. Ensure every packet is suitably and sufficiently sealed with a tight fit round the food and the seal intact. Check packets for excess air and/or leaks to minimise the risk of contamination and subsequent growth of bacteria.
9. Bone guards should be used with bone-in meat to prevent puncturing the packaging.
10. **Vacuum packed food must legally be stored at 8°C or below.** However as *C.botulinum* and *Listeria* can grow at refrigeration temperatures you are **strongly recommended to set the fridge temperature at 5 °C or less** to slow their growth.
11. Date marking, shelf-life, should not exceed 10 days for vacuum packed foods stored at 3-8°C unless additional safety controls are used. See further information for details of extending shelf-life.
12. **For the final consumer, clear 'use by dates' should be indicated. If the use by date is reliant on correct storage temperature, this must also be stated near the date mark** eg store at 5°C or less. **Labelling must comply with current food labelling regulations (contact East Sussex Trading Standards for more information).**
13. For foods vacuum packed in-house for other caterers, the age of the vacuum packed product should be easily identifiable to make sure correct stock rotation is maintained, ie with date of production and an appropriate 'Use by date'.
14. If food is being re-wrapped, this must be easily identified, eg corned beef from a tin – the date the tin was opened in addition to an approximate 'use by' date (10 days recommended unless there is evidence to support a longer durability date). Vacuum packing more than once must be avoided, as it becomes impossible to assess the shelf life for the product.
15. If the food is being vacuum packed at the request of a customer, give the customer clear advice on storing the food at the correct temperature. Make sure that customers are aware that once the packaging is opened the product should be consumed within two days.
16. It is essential that any out of date chilled vacuum packed products are discarded, even if the food appears acceptable to the senses, eg sight, smell, because it could cause illness.

Further information:

- Campden and Chorleywood Food Research Association- 'A Code of Practice for The Manufacture of Vacuum and Modified Atmosphere Packaged Chilled Foods'- May 1996, Guidance No 11, Tel. 01386 842000
<http://www.campden.co.uk/content.htm>

- Food Standards Agency - 'Guidance on the safety and shelf-life of vacuum and modified atmosphere packed chilled foods....'
<http://www.food.gov.uk/foodindustry/guidancenotes/foodguid/vacpac>
- Meat Livestock Commission- 'Shelf Life of Fresh Meat', Tel: 01908 844176

If you need any more information relating to advice given in this leaflet please contact the Food Safety team on 01323 443302

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