

# Safe Vacuum Packing

## Guidance Notes for Butchers, Small Caterers and Retailers

### **Introduction**

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

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 temperatures as low as 0°C. If allowed to multiply these bacteria can be fatal.

There is also a potential problem with bacteria like E. coli O157. It only takes small numbers of these bacteria to cause severe illness and in some cases death. The problems arise when cross contamination occurs from raw meats to ready to eat foods vacuum packed on the same machine.

### **Legal Requirements (in bold) and Good Practice Notes**

1. **The hazards and risks associated with vacuum packing foods must be considered by all businesses using the process. Written procedures detailing the precautions that must be taken have to be produced and implemented to protect customers from harmful bacteria (these are known as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points ( HACCP) procedures)**
2. **Ensure all staff involved in vacuum packing are fully trained in safe hygiene practices and the use of the machine. You must supervise and monitor their work to ensure procedures are being rigorously followed.**
3. Ideally separate vacuum packing machines should be used for raw and cooked foods because the risk of cross contamination is so high. Even if hygiene practices and procedures are extremely thorough there is still a high risk of cross contamination occurring due to human error. **Unless you can be absolutely certain that your hygiene practices are perfect you**

**must consider using separate vacuum packing machines for raw meats and ready to eat foods.**

**If you decide to continue to use just one machine your HACCP systems and hygiene practices must include the following.**

4. **Make sure all equipment, including the Vacuum Packing machine, slicing machines, knives and all work surfaces that may come in to contact with the food products are thoroughly cleaned and disinfected.** This means washing them with hot soapy water using a clean cloth. Then disinfecting them with a suitable anti-bacterial rinse/ spray. The disinfectant solution should be wiped off with a clean cloth, ideally disposable paper towels. Care must be taken to clean hidden areas that provide breeding grounds for germs.
5. **Bags used for vacuum packing must be stored in clean containers with close fitting lids to prevent them becoming contaminated.** Ideally separate containers of bags should be used for raw meats and ready to eat food. This will minimize the risk of the bags becoming contaminated by staff who have already packed raw meat.
6. **Prior to handling food, staff must wash their hands thoroughly,** preferably using anti bacterial soap and dry them on clean towels, ideally disposable paper towels. This is essential when handling ready to eat foods after raw meat. Where possible, make sure direct handling of food is kept to a minimum.
7. **Make sure the vacuum packing machine is working properly and is well maintained.** Check the vacuum pressure/time and sealing time settings. Ensure the heated strip that seals the bags is in good condition and clean. Keep records and documentation of any maintenance checks or repairs carried out.
8. **Ensure every bag is fully sealed with a tight fit round the food.** Check packets for air pockets and/or leaks a little while after bagging. If you find them, the food is not properly vacuum packed. It may not be safe to keep the food for as long as you otherwise would. You should remove the bag, check the machines control settings and vacuum pack it again.
9. If you find air pockets or leaks there may be a number of reasons.
  - The seal may not be complete. Check, clean and when necessary replace the heat sealing strip. Check the sealing time settings.
  - The combination of length of time and pressure used to create the vacuum may not have been long enough.
  - If the meat has bone in it air may have leached out of the bone after bagging. Bone guards should be used with bone-in meat to prevent sharp edges puncturing the packaging.
10. All products that are going to be vacuum packed must be as fresh as possible, and not kept for several days prior to packing.
11. **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.

12. The 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 (listed below) for details of extending shelf-life.
13. **Clear 'use by dates' must be put on the food sold to the public or other businesses to help ensure they use it safely. If the use by date is reliant on correct storage temperature, this must also be stated near the date mark eg store at 3°C or less. Labelling must comply with current food labelling regulations (contact East Sussex Trading Standards for more information).**
14. If the vacuum packed foods are for your own in-house use, the product should be clearly marked with the date of packing and the 'Use by' date to make sure correct stock rotation is maintained. Make sure you use the food as soon as possible but within two days of opening the bag.
15. If food is being re-wrapped, this must be clearly labelled, e.g. 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).
16. **Vacuum packing foods more than once must be avoided at all times as it becomes impossible to assess the shelf life or safety of the product**, e.g. opening a vacuum pack of sliced, cooked meat that is at the end of it's shelf life and vacuum packing it again to extend it's "apparent" shelf life is very unsafe and could easily lead to people getting food poisoning.
17. 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.
18. **It is essential that any out of date chilled vacuum packed products are discarded, even if the food looks, smells and feels alright because it could cause food poisoning.**

#### **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 Public Protection Team on 01323 443302