



Step 16 - Vacuum packing ready to eat & high risk food

Summary

Vacuum-packing is a popular way of extending the shelf-life of food products. It is a very good way of preventing food spoilage, but it can create conditions which may lead to growth of bacteria.

It is essential, therefore, that bacteria is controlled by correct storage temperatures and correct use of use-by dates.

What could happen?

There is significant potential for multiplication of anaerobic bacteria, germination of spores to vegetative bacteria and subsequent toxin production if prolonged time at ambient during the process, product not maintained at correct temperature post process, or if prolonged shelf life given to products.

There is also significant potential for re-contamination of food through cross contamination from raw food products, which will therefore make the food unsafe.

Procedure

- The integrity of seals should be validated regularly by vacuum packing a clean disposable cloth (dry) and then immersing into water. There should be no bubbles apparent and when opened the cloth should be dry. This validation should be carried out weekly, or if machine not used weekly before each run of products are vacuum packed.
- Vacuum-packing a product more than once should be avoided, as it becomes impossible to accurately assess its shelf-life.
- Raw and cooked food must not be packed on the same machine under any circumstances. Dedicated vacuum packers must be assigned for raw and cooked products.
- All food to be vacuum packed must be packed within 24 hours of delivery or cooling post processing.
- Clear use by dates and ingredient information must be indicated. Food vacuum packed on-site will have a shelf life of no more than 3 days or the original use-by date as the food will be stored above 3°C, whichever is the earlier.
- All vacuum packed food will be stored at 5°C or below (Maximum 8°C) once vacuum packed or frozen immediately (see Step 9 batch freezing).
- Vacuum packers should be checked regularly to ensure they are in good working order.
- Food must be labelled to include food allergen info.

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Hazards

- May contain allergens.
- Multiplication of pathogens.
- Contamination with pathogens or chemicals.

Checks and records

- Ensure cleanliness of vacuum packing machine and that any cleaning is correctly documented.

Critical limits

- Maximum of 24 hours after delivery or cooking.
- Maximum of 2 hours out of temperature control.
- Use within 3 days of the original 'Use by' date if earlier.

Controls

- **Only dedicated ready to eat food vacuum pack machine to be used.**
- Only good quality products to be vacuum packed.
- Sanitised vacuum packing machine to be used.
- Vacuum packing machine to be cleaned & disinfected or double sanitised (two-stage process) using approved chemicals which meet BS EN 1276:1997 or BS EN 13697:20001 or equivalent.
- Food to be cooled to 5°C prior to vacuum packing, no hot food to be vacuum packed (see separate information for sous – vide).
- Minimise the time of meat, poultry, fish, dairy products at room temperature to target of 30 minutes (maximum time of 2 hours) .
- Shelf life of no more than 3 days or original date code of the products (whichever is earliest).
- Product to be stored at 5°C or below after vacuum packing.
- Product must **only be vacuum packed on one occasion** to ensure shelf life control.
- Product labelled with internal shelf life, allergen info and required storage temperature post vacuum packing.
- Food is labelled to include food allergen info.

Corrective actions

- Report to Head Chef.
- Reject product if not good quality or contaminated.
- Re-clean & disinfect or double sanitise equipment.
- Reject any food not packaged on correct day or if in date use immediately.
- Dispose of any vacuum packed food out of date/temperature requirements or use immediately if not out of temperature for more than 2 hours.
- Unpack any food which has already been vacuum packed and either use immediately if in date or dispose.
- Dispose of any unlabelled food if date of vacuum packing cannot be traced.