

FOOD HANDLING DURING HOT WEATHER: ENSURING FOOD SAFETY IN GHANA

As temperatures rise during Ghana's hot season, the risk of foodborne illnesses increases due to the rapid growth of both spoilage and pathogenic bacteria, such as Salmonella, E. Coli, and Listeria.

These bacteria thrive in temperatures between 5°C and 60°C, a range commonly known as the "danger zone." In hot weather, keeping food out of this danger zone becomes more difficult, especially in areas where refrigeration is limited.

To protect public health, both food handlers and consumers must adopt effective food safety practices. During hot weather, food should be kept away from heat and moisture, which provide conducive environments for microorganisms to thrive.

Best Practices for Food Handling During Hot Weather

1. Proper Refrigeration and Temperature Control

- Foods such as meats, dairy products, fruits, vegetables, and cooked meals should be kept refrigerated at or below 4°C.
- In situations where refrigeration is unavailable, food should be consumed within a short while after preparation. Typically two hours.
- Foods left at room temperature should not be kept out for more than two hours. If the temperature exceeds 32°C, this time limit should be reduced to one hour.
- Food service establishments are encouraged to regularly check and record refrigerator temperatures to ensure they stay within safe limits.

2. Thorough Cooking and Reheating

- Meat, poultry, and seafood should be cooked to an internal temperature of 75°C to ensure bacteria are killed.
- Leftovers should also be reheated to a minimum internal temperature of 75°C before consumption since pathogens and spoilage microorganisms grow rapidly in warm weather.
- Reheating food multiple times without consuming all of it should be avoided as it increases the risk of contamination.
- Covering food during preparation, cooking, and serving protects it from dust, insects, and other airborne contaminants that are more prevalent in hot weather.

3. Hygiene Practices

- Food handlers must wash their hands with soap under clean running water before and after handling food, especially when switching between raw and cooked foods.

- All kitchen utensils, cooking surfaces, and cutting boards should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized between uses to prevent cross-contamination.
- Separate tools such as tongs, knives, and chopping boards should be used for raw and cooked foods to avoid the transfer of harmful bacteria.
- Leftovers should be cooled quickly and stored in shallow containers to allow for faster cooling.

4. Transportation of Food

- During hot weather, perishable foods should be transported in insulated coolers with ice packs to maintain safe temperatures.
- When transporting food for outdoor events or deliveries, it is crucial to minimize the time that perishable items are kept outside refrigeration.

5. Street Food and Market Safety

- Street food vendors and market traders must adhere to strict hygiene standards, including covering foods and keeping perishable items in coolers or refrigerated units.
- Vendors should minimize direct contact with food by using utensils, gloves, or tongs, and consumers are encouraged to buy from vendors who follow proper safety practices.

Local Market Food Handling During Hot Weather

In Ghana, local markets play a crucial role in food supply, especially for fresh produce, meats, and fish. However, hot weather poses a significant challenge to food safety in these settings, where refrigeration facilities are often limited or nonexistent. It is important that food sellers and market authorities implement strategies to minimize spoilage and contamination.

1. Cooling Techniques in Markets

- Sellers should use insulated coolers or boxes filled with ice to store perishable items like meat, fish, and dairy products.
- Frequent misting of fresh farm produce with cool potable water can help keep vegetables and fruits cool and fresh, reducing wilting or spoilage.
- Fresh farm produce should be sold in a timely manner to prevent spoilage which is more rapid in hot weather.
- Local markets should consider providing shared refrigeration units or cool storage spaces to help preserve perishable goods.

- Markets should be well-ventilated to reduce heat and moisture accumulation in stalls, and sellers should use insulated containers for fish, meat, and dairy to ensure food stays fresh for longer periods.

2. Handling Perishable Goods

- Foods displayed for sale must be rotated frequently to ensure older stock is sold first, reducing waste and spoilage.
- Traders should be trained on basic food safety practices, particularly on preventing cross-contamination and ensuring the cleanliness of their working areas to help reduce the prevalence of pathogens and food spoilage microorganisms.

Hot weather conditions significantly heighten the risks of foodborne illnesses due to the rapid growth of harmful bacteria.

However, by following the FDA recommended safety practices, both food handlers and consumers can help minimize these risks. Effective refrigeration, thorough cooking, proper hygiene, safe water usage, and smart food transportation are crucial steps in preventing food contamination.

In markets, vendors and authorities must work together to ensure that perishable goods are stored and handled safely to protect public health. By remaining vigilant and implementing these strategies, we can ensure food safety during the hot season in Ghana.