

# DANGEROUS DAYS OUT

While you're enjoying lunch on your day out, the bacteria could also be out in force

Many takeaway food outlets at popular events have such poor control over hygiene that they're putting diners' health at risk. We sent a food safety consultant and microbiologist to four events to check the safety of the food on sale. Only around a third of the foods we tested managed a clean bill of health. Nine foods (including five from the Ideal Home Show) had such high bacteria levels that our expert told us: 'If I'd been carrying out this work for a company, I would have strongly advised a product recall.' Bacteria levels at the posh and pricey events were worse than at the cheap and cheerful. At Cheltenham Racecourse, just a quarter of foods passed with flying colours, compared with almost half at an antiques fair at Newark Showground.

Not all the bacteria we found will make you ill and some might cause only a mild stomach upset. Others are more serious, particularly for people who are very young, old, frail or pregnant. *Listeria monocytogenes*, for example, can cause miscarriage in pregnant women or septicaemia. In most cases, high bacteria levels could have been easily prevented by better staff hygiene.

Infuriatingly, there's no way to check whether a food outlet has had hygiene problems in the past. Many cases of food poisoning go unreported and the source of poisoning can be hard to trace. New freedom of information legislation should make it easier to obtain the results of health and safety inspections but the process is time-consuming.

## POOR STAFF HYGIENE

We found worrying levels of all the bacteria and fungi we tested for, apart from salmonella and clostridia. Nineteen foods had unacceptably high

## BACTERIA BREAKDOWN

We bought a total of 93 foods from 47 food vans and stalls across four events. Our experts chilled each sample immediately and took it to an accredited lab to test for the following bacteria. See 'Scoreboard', overleaf, for details of what we found.

### Bacillus

*Bacillus cereus* is particularly associated with reheating rice. Can cause abdominal pain, diarrhoea and vomiting.

### Clostridia

Associated with poor cooking and slow cooling of food. Can cause severe stomach upset.

### E. coli

These bacteria indicate poor hygiene, cross-contamination and possibly faecal contamination.

### Enterobacteriaceae

High numbers can indicate inadequate cooking or contamination from dirty equipment or raw meat.

### Listeria

*Listeria monocytogenes* can grow at low temperatures and can cause miscarriage.

### Pseudomonas

These cause food to smell, taste and look off, and can also irritate the stomach.

### Salmonella

Causes vomiting, diarrhoea and fever. Can be fatal for elderly or frail people and very young children.

### Staphylococcus aureus

Usually indicates poor hygiene by handlers. The toxins produced can cause severe stomach upsets.

### Thermotolerant coliforms

High numbers can indicate poor personal hygiene, such as lack of hand-washing.

### Total viable count

The total of all bacteria present. A high number indicates poor cleaning or temperature control.

### Yeast and mould

These cause food to go off and can also lead to food poisoning on rare occasions.



## SCOREBOARD

There are no legal standards for bacteria in most foods, though new EU laws may soon change this. Our experts interpreted the results using a combination of industry standards and public health guidelines, and awarded each food a pass, warning or fail mark. The graphs show how many samples fell into each category.

### Pass

This indicates a good result, with an acceptably low level of micro-organisms.

### Warning

Contains significant levels of micro-organisms, which could grow to unacceptable

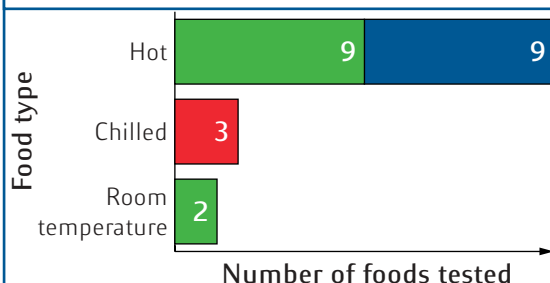
levels given the right conditions. The outlets should check their food-handling practices.

### Fail

High levels of micro-organisms, some of which have the potential to make you

ill. Nine foods (detailed below) had such high levels that we informed the companies so they could investigate.

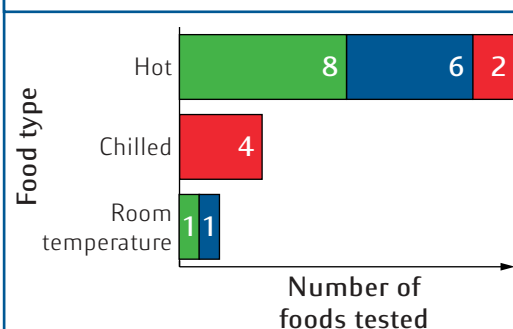
### Antiques fair, Newark County Showground 5 February 2005



Only the chilled food we tested failed our tests, but the standard of visible hygiene across different outlets was variable. Some stalls had lots of spills and a build-up of food

debris around the counter. In the Refreshment Bar in the Lady Eastwood building, sandwiches were stored in the warm, rather than kept chilled.

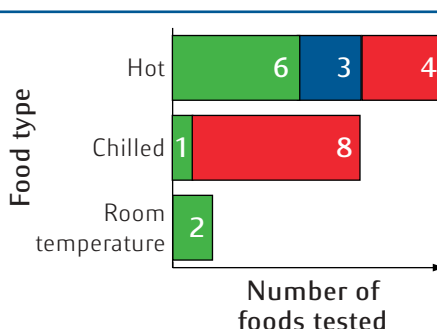
### Rugby at Twickenham stadium 4 December 2004



- High levels of **Staphylococcus aureus** on BLT sandwich from Upper Crust, Level 2, East Stand. Our inspectors noticed that the sandwiches at this stall weren't kept chilled.
- High levels of **Bacillus cereus** on chicken tikka and rice from Lazeez Express, Level 2 East Stand. We sent details of the above two

findings to All Leisure, the company in charge of on-site catering. It told us that it has 'an exemplary record in hygiene and food safety'. It also said that, as a consequence of our investigation, it's scrutinised procedures 'to make certain that the products we serve meet the highest standards'.

### Ideal Home Show, Earls Court 15 March 2005



- High levels of **Staphylococcus aureus**, **thermotolerant coliforms**, **Pseudomonas** and **Enterobacteriaceae** in a chicken caesar salad, plus high **E. coli** levels on a Mediterranean feta wrap. Both foods were from Crussh in Earls Court 2.
- High levels of **Pseudomonas**, **thermotolerant coliforms** and

**Enterobacteriaceae** on a green pesto pasta salad from Dash in Earls Court 2.

- High levels of **Pseudomonas**, **Enterobacteriaceae** and **thermotolerant coliforms** on a salad niçoise from PizzaExpress.
- High levels of **E. coli** and **thermotolerant coliforms** on a crêpe from Normandie Crêpes in the Food Court at Earls Court 1. Our

inspectors noticed one staff member wearing a dirty apron and handling the food a lot.

We sent details of the five problem foods above to the relevant companies. Crussh and PizzaExpress said they are now reviewing their procedures. Clifton Environmental Services Ltd, on behalf of Normandie Crêpes, told us it has received no complaints about food poisoning.

Earls Court responded by saying it's 'working closely with all the outlets involved to ensure that extra measures are put in place to prevent a recurrence'.



levels of thermotolerant coliforms – indicating possible faecal contamination and suggesting that staff were soap-shy when it came to washing their hands after toilet breaks. Jenny Morris from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health explains why hygiene is sometimes so lax: 'A lot of big events use temporary staff. Hygiene training is left up to the owners and is extremely variable.'

We found a particular problem with chilled foods. All the cold food from Newark, Cheltenham and Twickenham failed our tests – usually due to its being stored at the wrong temperature or being touched by staff with dirty hands or equipment. While a portion of fish and chips may be no friend to your heart, the high cooking temperatures destroy most bacteria, and hot food is generally handled less often.

### FINDING OUT MORE

The poor levels of hygiene we found are unsurprising, given the lack of controls. Anyone can open a food business and start selling food. All they have to do is register with the local authority – which amounts to little more than filling in a form. Once a food business opens, environmental health officers (EHOs) inspect it for safety and hygiene, but these visits may be as infrequent as every two years. And records of inspections are generally not made public. As we went to press, the Highland Council in Scotland became the first in the UK to

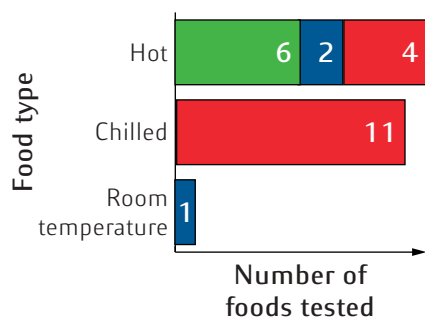
publish full details of hygiene inspections (see [www.highland.gov.uk](http://www.highland.gov.uk)).

New freedom of information legislation means anyone can request details of EHOs' inspections – so in theory you should be able to vet a restaurant before you eat there. But it's not that easy in practice, as we found when we contacted the local authorities responsible for the venues we visited. Earls Court straddles two boroughs. Kensington & Chelsea (responsible for Earls Court 1) worked hard to provide us with information but Hammersmith & Fulham (which inspects Earls Court 2) refused our request. It said that publicising results would make traders more likely to refuse EHOs access in future, despite the fact that EHOs have a legal right to enter premises. We're asking the Information Commissioner to review this decision. The other councils provided us with most of the information we needed. Councils are entitled to ask for a payment for providing information. Cheltenham Borough Council was the only council to do so, charging £60 for photocopying and postage.

The information we received reveals a pattern of general problems with staff hygiene and basic cleaning at the venues (though comments may not relate directly to the outlets we visited). The EHO report from Cheltenham Gold Cup festival in 2003, for example, mentions a lack of hot water in mobile food outlets, food on sale past its use-by date, blocked access to handwashing sinks, and no soap or hand-drying facilities. Inspectors' comments from other events at the racecourse included: 'Gloves must be changed after handling raw meat. You cannot use the same gloves for handling baps.' Another inspector wrote: 'Remind staff about importance of handwashing after coughing into hands', and 'Remind staff to use soap when they wash their hands.' Another points out that 'agency staff had received no hygiene training at all'.

Left to their own devices, many food traders aren't putting customers' safety first. We hope the threat of a poor inspection finding being made public will persuade them to follow basic hygiene procedures and ensure all staff are properly trained.

## Gold Cup Day, Cheltenham Racecourse 18 March 2005



- **Listeria monocytogenes** in a smoked salmon sandwich from the Cottage Rake Bar in the Club enclosure.
  - High levels of **Staphylococcus aureus** in a hot bacon baguette with stuffing and colcannon from the Bacon Hoagie Bar in Tattersalls.
- We shared these two findings with All Leisure, the parent company of caterers Letheby & Christopher. The company told us that it's been providing food at Cheltenham for 80 years, and that it catered for around 35,000 Gold Cup racegoers this year 'without incident'. It said that, upon hearing from us, it's 'conducted a thorough investigation with suppliers and the on-site operations team'.

### which? says

We're campaigning for all new food businesses to be vetted before they can open, and to make it compulsory for councils to publish results of hygiene inspections on their websites.

We'd also like all food outlets to display their hygiene scores on the door or window (as happens

in Denmark), so the public can check hygiene levels at a glance.

More transparency will also help to raise standards. A US study shows that hygiene levels improved and that incidents of food poisoning decreased when information about restaurants' hygiene levels was made public.

## What to look for

Follow our tips to minimise your risk of food poisoning.

- Before you buy, check whether counters and surfaces are clean, and whether servers have clean hands, nails and clothes.
- Look for separate sinks for washing hands and utensils.
- Staff should use utensils to handle food. If they're wearing gloves, check that they change them frequently – for example, between handling raw and cooked food.
- Hot food cooked to order is generally the safest.
- If you buy cold food, such as sandwiches or salads, make sure it's been stored in a fridge and that it's still cold when you pick it up.
- Avoid buying cold food and keeping it to eat later – you could be giving low levels of bacteria the perfect opportunity to multiply to dangerous levels.