

## Common Food complaints

Discovering a foreign object in food or other problems with food can be a very unpleasant experience. However, not all pose a serious health risk and there are a few simple steps you can take to resolve the problem yourself. This document gives some common food complaints together with a short explanation on how they occur and suggestions for the best course of action.

The information provided in this document is intended as a self-help guide for consumers and local businesses to help you to solve common issues that occur routinely in items of food. The aim of this guide is save time so that our food safety officers can concentrate on more serious issues that pose a potential risk to public health

If you are unable to resolve the problem that you have by reading our self-help guide and following the steps suggested, please contact on 520 5550 You can contact us about food you have purchased or hygiene standards in a food premises within the Sunderland area. We are, however unable to get involved in compensation claims following a food complaint. All complaints about hygiene standards in premises are evaluated for potential public health risk and an appropriate response taken. We will only deal with complaints where there is a potential public health risk.

When making a complaint to us, please make sure you have the food in question, details of where and when it was purchased and how it has been stored. We are also unable to deal with complaints unless we are provided with contact details such as a valid email address or contact telephone number and your full postal address. If you think you are suffering from food poisoning you should consult your GP, who will arrange for you to submit a stool sample for analysis. If you have become ill after attending an event and a number of other people at the event are ill with similar symptoms, please contact us immediately

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## Canned foods

### Field insects, wasps and fruit flies

Insects that live naturally in fields may be harvested along with fruit and vegetables. Whilst food companies take steps to remove these insects, some will slip through the net. These insects and grubs are killed and sterilised by the canning process. There is no public health risk.

**Action:** Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer using the details on the can.

### Stones in canned peas

During harvesting, sometimes small stones can be accidentally collected too. Stones of certain size, weight and appearance can be missed during the sorting process. As long as the manufacturer can show that all reasonable precautions were taken to try to stop this from happening, it is accepted that a number of these complaints will occur.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer. If you have damaged a tooth or cut your mouth as a result of stones in food we cannot act on your behalf in these matters. You should contact the manufacturer and also seek legal advice from a solicitor if necessary.

### Larvae / Grubs in canned vegetables

Small grubs are often found in canned vegetables, particularly tomatoes and sweetcorn. Their colour is often cream to greenish brown with long dark and pale bands, but this is variable. They can be up to 4cm in length. People think they may be maggots or caterpillars. These are moth larvae that live inside the food, and are difficult to see during growing and processing. The larvae are killed and sterilised by the canning process so they are not a health risk. Every effort is made to control these pests while crops are growing. But you may find these larvae in food as the use of pesticides in food crops has decreased and there is an increase in the use of organic produce, where crops are not sprayed with any chemicals, there is no public health risk.

**Action:** Although unpleasant to find a grub in the food, there is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer.

### White spots in tinned grapefruit

Sometimes, tinned grapefruit will be covered in white specks that look like mould. Also the liquid in the tin may be cloudy. This is actually a natural constituent of the grapefruit called "Naringin" and it gives the fruit its distinctive bitter taste. Variations in the weather cause an increase in the amount of Naringin the fruit contains and when canned, this excess Naringin crystallizes out. The product is safe to eat and there is no health risk.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer. There is no public health risk.

### Mould

Dented, damaged or incorrectly processed cans may allow mould growth to occur. This could indicate an error in production and poor handling during storage or distribution. It is difficult to establish who is responsible for this type of damage to canned foods. Affected foods should not be consumed.

**Action:** This may be unsightly there is very little we can do with this type of complaint it is best to return the affected food to the retailer or manufacturer.

## **Glass-like crystals in canned fish - Struvite**

Certain naturally occurring elements commonly found in fish may develop into hard crystals during the canning process. They are a harmless compound of magnesium ammonium phosphate. It is especially common in canned salmon. These crystals may be mistaken for glass fragments and are called struvite. They are not harmful and will be broken down by stomach acids when swallowed.

You can tell the difference between Struvite and glass by doing simple tests at home; Struvite crystals are softer than glass and can be scratched or crushed between two hard surfaces, such as two spoons, into a powder. If you look under a magnifying glass the edges are smooth where broken glass will be irregular.

Struvite crystals are soluble in a hot dilution of vinegar or lemon juice and water when gently heated for up to 15-20 minutes (the crystals will not dissolve completely in this time but will reduce in size). Glass will not dissolve. Finding Struvite is actually quite rare, despite the large volumes of fish produced each year. As yet no procedure has been successful in preventing it happening, even the addition of polyphosphates is not 100% effective and most people do not want any more additives in food.

**Action:** You should heat gently in vinegar or lemon juice and water for 15-20 minutes. If the crystal does not dissolve or crush, then it could be glass, please contact us for advice. If the crystal dissolves it is struvite there is no public health risk, we would advise you to eat the product as normal, but if you are still concerned, please contact the manufacturer of the product.

## **Fish**

### **Glowing fish - Luminous marine bacteria**

Luminous bacteria can sometimes be found on seafood. Crabmeat, cooked shrimps, prawns, or processed seafood products made from Surimi. These are the most common seafood associated with luminescence or glowing. This suggests that the seafood was held for a time at a temperature that allowed the bacteria to grow. When seafood glows it means that luminous bacteria are present, the light is produced by a reaction with a substance in the bacteria, oxygen and water, similar to the reaction which makes fireflies glow. It does not mean the seafood is unsafe or of low quality. There are no reports of illness from luminous marine bacteria growing on seafood, and they are not radioactive!

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer / retailer. There is no public health risk.

### **Cod worm**

White fish such as cod or haddock may be infested with small, round brownish- yellow worms found in the flesh. These worms are known scientifically as *Phocanema decipiens*. There is no evidence that anyone has ever had an illness associated with the cod worm. The worms are killed by the cooking and freezing process and are harmless. The affected parts of the fish are usually cut away but occasionally some may be missed in fresh fish and a worm may be discovered alive. This may be alarming to see, the worms are harmless if consumed. There is no public health risk. The incidence of infected fish is very small in relation to the thousands of tonnes of fish landed each year.

**Action:** You should contact the retailer or supplier, there is no public health risk.

### **Fish bones**

Fish naturally contain bones. Whilst the manufacturers take every care to remove these bones, in products such as fish fingers and other processed fish product a few may remain

due to the way that the products are manufactured. Bones from a certain part of the fish may resemble a piece of plastic, being broad, flat and flexible in appearance. As long as the manufacturer has taken all reasonable steps to remove the bones, then we cannot take formal action.

**Action:** You should contact the retailer, supplier or manufacturer there is no public health risk.

### **Sea lice**

Sea lice refers to several species of parasitic copepods that are commonly found on fish in the marine environment. They have been found in salmon, stickleback, herring and rainbow trout. The lice usually fall off or are cleaned off during harvesting or processing.

**Action:** Sea lice do not affect human health. There is no public health risk.

## **Vegetables & Fruit**

### **Stones, soil & slugs**

Fruit and vegetables commonly have soil, stones or small slugs and snails adhering to them. This is quite normal as they originate in the soil. These can even be found in prewashed vegetables.

**Action:** You should wash all fruit and vegetables thoroughly before eating them. There is no public health risk.

### **Greenfly**

Salad vegetables (especially lettuce) may have greenfly attached. Greenfly are not harmful and can be difficult to wash off salad vegetables. They are becoming more common as the use of pesticides decreases. The greenfly are not a public health risk.

**Action:** Wash all salad items thoroughly. There is no public health risk.

### **Mould**

Mould growth will naturally occur when fruit and vegetables become damaged and bruised, or if stored for too long. Do not consume mouldy fruit or vegetables.

**Action:** We recommend that you check the produce before purchase and handle it carefully after purchase. Contact the retailer if you need to make a complaint. There is no public health risk.

### **Spiders in bananas**

Sometimes, spiders can come to Britain in fruit, vegetables and other products. The Huntsman or Giant Crab Spiders, are large, brown, crab-like spiders that have flattened bodies that enable them to fit into very small crevices. This spider lives in tropical and subtropical regions and is common in houses where they eat cockroaches and other insects, but not Europe where it is too cold. It is transported throughout the world in banana shipments, It is harmless, but a large one can deliver a painful bite if carelessly handled.

**Action:** In the unlikely event that you are bitten contact a doctor.

### **Mushroom fibres / Hair**

Sometimes we get complaints about hairs in food such as pizza, often these 'hairs' turn out to be mushroom fibres. The mushroom that we know is actually the fruiting body of the hidden mushroom plant. This plant is made up of microscopic filaments (hyphae) which

combine to form strands called **mycelium**. The mycelium grows in the soil on wood and leaves, or in commercial mushroom farming, compost. The mushroom body first develops as a tiny ball on the mycelium and grows to a certain size before being picked to eat! Sometimes, strands of mycelium can remain with the mushroom during preparation and cooking. When cooked, the fibrous mycelium can look like a coarse hair.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. Contact the retailer or manufacturer.

### **Cardamom pods in pilau rice**

Cardamom pods are sometimes mistaken by members of the public as rodent droppings or insects. Cardamom is the common name for certain plant species native to India and south-eastern Asia. The fruit (pod) is a small capsule with 8 to 16 brown seeds; the seeds are used as a spice or the pods can be used whole in pilau rice.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. Cardamom pods can either be removed or eaten.

### **Insects in jam**

These are usually wasps or fruit flies. These insects are naturally associated with fruit and fruit growing areas. As they are small and light, some will inevitably get past the inspection process. They do not carry disease and are not a health risk.

**Action:** We recommend that you check the produce before purchase and return to the retailer. There is no public health risk.

### **Larvae in frozen vegetables**

The same information for larvae in canned foods applies to frozen foods, these are not harmful.

**Action:** Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer.

### **Mould in juice and food cartons**

1. Cardboard juice and food cartons may become dented and damaged if poorly handled during storage and distribution. This damage can cause small holes to occur in the seams of the carton which allow air to enter the carton causing mould to grow in the food or juice inside the carton.

The holes are difficult to detect and it is only upon opening the carton that the mould is discovered. It is difficult to establish who is responsible for this type of damage to cardboard juice and food cartons. Affected foods should not be consumed.

**Action:** Contact the manufacturer or retailer. There is no public health risk.

2. There may also be other causes of mould growth please check the following information first - what is the use by date on the product, or storage time after opening the product and has the product been stored correctly after opening. Has the product passed the storage period set by the manufacturer once it is opened? Please read the manufacturer's instructions on the product packaging. It is possible that mould will grow if a product is out of date or has been stored for too long at the wrong temperature. This may not be the fault of the manufacturer or retailer. Affected foods should not be consumed.

**Action:** Contact the manufacturer or retailer. There is no public health risk.

## Chocolate / Confectionery

### Bloom

Chocolate may develop a light coloured bloom if stored at too high a temperature. It is not mould but due to fat separation within the product and is not harmful.

**Action:** You should return the product to the retailer or manufacturer. There is no public health risk.

### Crystals

Large crystals may form in confectionery and may be mistaken for glass. The crystals will dissolve in warm water.

**Action:** You should test with warm water if the crystals dissolve, there is no public health risk. Please return the product to the retailer or manufacturer. If the crystals do not dissolve, there may be a public health risk, please contact the food safety on 0191 520 5550.

## Dried foods

### Insects

Insects like beetles and weevils may infest dried products such as flour, sugar, milk powder, semolina and pulses if they are stored too long. These insects do not carry disease, but they breed very quickly in warm, humid conditions and spread into uncontaminated food very quickly. They are not a public health risk.

**Action:** Do not use an insecticide because of the danger of contaminating your food, but dispose of all visibly infested packages in an outside waste bin. Thoroughly clean the cupboards using a vacuum cleaner paying particular attention to crevices and the edges of shelves. Immediately afterwards, empty the vacuum cleaner into an outside waste bin. Store new dried goods in airtight containers and ensure good ventilation in storage areas.

### Psocids - Small insects in flour

Psocids are very, very small grey or brown insects which are only very occasionally found in dry foods like flour, milk powder, sugar, semolina, etc. and because of this you may see them in your kitchen cupboards too. They are harmless insects about 1-2 mm long, which can survive in dry powdery foods. They are not due to poor hygiene. They prefer dark, warm, humid places and can be found in the folds of food packaging in kitchen cupboards. They eat a wide variety of dried food products such as flour, cereals and the microscopic moulds that develop in humid conditions. They live for about six months, during which time they can lay up to 100 eggs. They breed very quickly and so spread into uncontaminated food very quickly.

#### Action:

- All affected food should be removed and thrown away in a bin outside.
- Check all remaining food including the labels and throw away as necessary.
- Thoroughly clean the cupboard using a damp cloth with a mild sterilising solution (following the instructions on the bottle and avoid using bleach and disinfectant solutions as these may taint food).
- Dry the cupboard thoroughly before food is returned to the cupboard, use a hairdryer if necessary.
- New dried foods should be stored in airtight containers.

- Keep the kitchen and food storage cupboards well ventilated and dry.
- There is no public health risk.

If you have only just purchased the product from a shop and you believe the problem came from there, please contact the food safety team on 0191 520 5550

## Bakery goods

### Bakery char

Bread and cakes may contain irregular shaped bits of overcooked dough which has flaked off bakery tins. Occasionally some flakes or drops may become incorporated with the dough and are mistaken for rodent droppings which are black and torpedo shaped whilst bakery char is greyish and uneven in shape.

**Action:** This is not a public health risk and you should contact the manufacturer / retailer to discuss.

### Carbonised grease

The machinery used to produce bread and cakes is lubricated with a non-toxic vegetable oil. Occasionally some may become incorporated into dough giving areas of the product a grey/greasy appearance and you may suspect there is dirt or oil in the food.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as this is not a public health risk.

## Meat & Poultry

### Skin, bone or other animal material

Products made from meat and/or poultry may contain small bones, skin, or parts of blood vessels. These are unsightly but rarely a health hazard as they are normal parts of the original animal.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as this is not a public health risk. If you have damaged a tooth or cut your mouth on a small bone or a piece of animal tooth in food we cannot act on your behalf in these matters. You should contact the manufacturer and also seek legal advice from a solicitor if necessary.

**Note:** It is very rare for prohibited parts of an animal e.g., genitals, eyes, eyelids, etc., or non-food animals e.g. cats and dogs to be used for human food. Meat such as chicken and lamb are readily available and relatively inexpensive. It is not economic for food businesses to make use of prohibited parts of food animals or non-food species.

## Chicken

### Red leg

A natural pigment held within the bone being released after cooking and taking on the appearance of meat not being correctly cooked causes red leg in cooked chicken. The chicken will be thoroughly cooked but the temperature is not high enough to denature the pigment.

**Action:** Ensure the chicken is thoroughly cooked and the juices are running clear. This is not a public health risk.



## **Oregon disease or deep pectoral myopathy**

This is a condition of Turkeys and Chickens (Broilers). It is caused by a reduction in blood supply to the deep pectoral muscles. The lesion is apple green, which is retained on cooking. The colour is not noticed until the bird is carved after cooking.

**Action:** It is unsightly but there is no public health risk. Contact the retailer or manufacturer.

## **Cooked and cured meat and poultry**

### **Ham**

Ham cooked in a Panini is discoloured after cooking. There are three possible reasons for this:

1. The "cure" (nitrite level) was not as high as it could have been; and/or
2. The ripening flora of the cheese (if also in the Panini) can produce very small quantities of hydrogen peroxide, which when combined with the ham, can cause discolouration.
3. The ham used is out of date.

**Action:** Points 1 and 2 are issues of quality, however as the ham used could be out of date an investigation would be required. Please contact the food safety team on 0191 520 5550

## **Wine**

### **Crystals**

Tartrate Crystals; also known as "wine diamonds" are a natural product of the wine, and form when the wine gets too cold. Simply sift the crystals out of the wine. The crystals are not harmful in any way.

**Action:** If you believe it is not tartrate crystals in your wine, but glass contamination, please contact the food safety team on 0191 520 5550

### **Corked Wine**

Cork is a natural product, which is an ideal closure for wine, but occasionally the cork could be diseased and affect the taste of the wine. This disease is not harmful and is called "Trichloroanisole" (TCA). It is extremely difficult to detect during manufacture and unfortunately also evades detection during the inspection procedures suppliers of the wine carry out before the wine is bottled. Unfortunately, TCA which is found naturally in cork, can be detected by the human nose at just one part per million, so when it is present you know about it.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as this is not a public health risk.

## **General Issues**

### **Hair in Food**

It is always distressing to find a human hair in your food, however this is rarely of public health significance. It can be an indication of poor hygiene practices in relation to the wearing of hair nets, however, on its own, we would not take any action.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as this is not a public health risk.

## Durability dates

### 'Use by date'

'Use by' means exactly that. You should not use any food or drink after the end of the 'use by' date shown on the label. Even if it looks and smells fine, food should not be sold or used after this date as there is a public health risk. You will usually find a 'use by' date on food that goes off quickly such as, chilled cooked and cured meats, milk, soft cheese, ready-prepared salads and smoked fish. It's also important to follow any storage instructions given on food labels, otherwise the food might not last until the 'use by' date. Usually food with a 'use by' date needs to be kept in the fridge. Some food labels also give instructions such as 'eat within a **'2-3 days'** or a **'week'** after opening' it is important to follow these instructions. But remember, if the 'use by' date is tomorrow, then you must use the food by the end of tomorrow. Even if the label says 'eat within a week of opening' and you have only opened the food today. Make sure that the food is always stored in the fridge after it is opened. 'Display until' and 'sell by' dates are instructions for shop staff to tell them when they should take a product off the shelves. It is an offence for food businesses to sell or use food that has passed its use by date.

**Action:** If you have a complaint about food being sold past its use by date. This is a public health risk. Please contact the food safety team on 0191 520 5550

### 'Minimum durability date' known as 'Best before dates'

'Minimum durability dates' are usually used on foods that last longer, such as frozen, dried or canned foods. It should be safe to eat food after the 'minimum durability' date, but the food will no longer be at its best. After this date, the food might begin to lose its flavour and texture but there is no public health risk. However, if you eat eggs after their minimum durability date, you will need to make sure you cook both the yolk and the white thoroughly and they must be used within 2 days of their minimum durability date.

It is not an offence for food businesses to sell food that has passed its minimum durability date. However it is an offence if a food business sells or uses food past its best before date if the food is mouldy, affected by insects, beginning to spoil, or its condition is physically deteriorating and finally the food must meet the legal description of being not of the nature, substance or quality.

**Action:** If you have a complaint about food being not of the nature, substance or quality. This is a public health risk. Please contact the food safety team on 0191 520 5550

### Other dates

You may see "Sell By" or "Display Until" on some packs. These are not legally required dates and are meant to be instructions for in-store staff. For fresh fruit and vegetables these may be the only dates shown, as they usually do not need a "Best Before" date. On other foods it may be in addition to the "Use By" or "Best Before" date shown.

## Labelling and allergen labelling requirements

The fundamental rule of the labelling of foodstuffs is that consumers should not be misled. Detailed labelling of a product educates consumers as to the exact nature and characteristics of the foodstuff and enables them to make a more informed choice.

**Action:** Further information about food labelling can be found on the Food Standards Agency website. [www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

## **Allergen labelling**

For information about the allergen labelling requirements please visit the Food Standards Agency website: [www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label](http://www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label)