

Using Customer Provided Re-Usable Containers in Food Facilities in Saskatchewan

Introduction

Food facilities in Saskatchewan are required to comply with *The Food Safety Regulations*. Food facilities include (but are not limited to) restaurants, take-out food facilities, and grocery stores. The regulations do not prohibit the use of customer-provided containers in a food facility. Any facility wishing to do so may accept customer provided containers. This fact sheet provides guidance to these facilities when implementing a change to ensure food safety is maintained.

It is important to note that Health officials may take action to have this practice discontinued should they form the opinion that the practice causes an undue risk to food safety.

Food Safety Considerations

Food safety considerations have been identified with the practice of customer provided reusable containers becoming more common. They include the potential for:

- cross-contamination due to improperly cleaned and sanitized containers;
- contamination of the bulk food source from unsanitary containers;
- chemical contamination from the use of non-food grade containers; and
- physical contamination from damaged, broken or chipped containers, especially glass and ceramic containers.

A food facility is responsible for ensuring the safety of the products they serve at the point of sale. Allowing customers to provide their own containers changes the responsibility for food safety to a shared one between the consumer and the food facility. Facility employees will be unable to ensure that containers have been properly washed, rinsed, and sanitized between uses to minimize contamination risk. Retailers will also have to consider how to handle returned foods if permitted in facility policy.

There are three main routes that most facilities are considering appropriate for customer provided containers:

1. Bulk food purchases.
2. Take away foods and drinks.
3. Packing up leftovers from restaurants.

1. Bulk Food Purchases

A grocery retail situation holds the greatest potential for cross-contamination at the point of service to occur. The development of operational policies that would help assure consistency in approach as well as public and employee understanding of the practice is recommended.

These policies could include:

- forbidding glass containers due to risk in handling and contamination should breakage occur;
- posting instructive signs for the public that include:
 - the type of suitable containers accepted;
 - making it clear that containers must be clean and not broken;
 - making it clear that employees reserve the right to refuse containers; and
 - a process for properly washing and sanitizing containers between uses.
- empowering staff to screen and refuse use of customer containers if cleanliness or container integrity is not present;
- increasing hand-washing frequency among staff who handle outside containers;
- increasing surface cleaning and avoid contact between the containers and surfaces used to prepare and serve foods; and,
- ensuring serving utensils are thoroughly cleaned and sanitized between uses and limit contact between utensils and containers.

2. Take Away Food and Drink

Usage of customer provided container for take away food and drinks at restaurant type facilities pose potential food safety risks that can be mitigated by following these recommendations:

- public education on proper “wash-rinse-sanitize” procedures posted or available;
- screening criteria for containers based on cleanliness should be well explained to both customers and employees;
- cross-contamination is a serious issue with high-risk foods and it is advised that the facility have strict protocols in place for the safe serving of this type of food; and,
- if the restaurant will be accepting customer provided containers to common areas (i.e. the kitchen, serving area, etc.) to fill, they must be aware of the cross-contamination risk and handle the container appropriately, including washing hands after handling and ensuring any utensil and surface in contact with the container are properly sanitized afterwards.

Coffee shops commonly allow customers to bring in their own reusable cups. This is an acceptable practice from a food safety perspective.

3. Packing up Restaurant Leftovers

It is acceptable for customers to provide their own containers to pack up their leftovers at the table.

More Information

Contact your local public health inspector for further information on *The Food Safety Regulations* and associated standards. Contact information for SHA public health inspection offices is available at: <http://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/public-health/public-health-inspector>