

# Practices that Support the Safe Use of Reusable Food Containers

Some customers may wish to bring their reusable containers to restaurants for beverages, leftover meal packaging, staff service takeout, or dispensing non-perishable bulk foods.

Below are a few ways customers and restaurants can help minimize food safety risks.

## General Practices to Keep in Mind

Applicable to all reusable cups and containers:

- **Transfer the food or beverage** without the customer's container touching the dispensing container.
- **Use a clean and sanitized utensil** if the food or beverage requires stirring or mixing. Once used, the utensil should be considered contaminated (one-time use).
- **Wash hands or change gloves** before and after handling the customer's container. Containers have been handled and stored under unknown conditions while in the customer's possession.
- **Establish easy-to-understand criteria for customers.** For example, containers must be visually clean and in good condition, suitable for their intended purpose.
  - o If the container is not food-grade, there is potential for contamination by migration of chemicals from the container into the food product, especially after repeated use.
  - o Physical contamination can occur from damaged, broken, or chipped containers, especially glass and ceramic containers.

## Beverage Services

If your customers bring in a reusable beverage cup or thermos, request they remove the detachable lid before handing their cup to staff. When staff are accepting a reusable cup, grab it by the base and do not touch any areas that would contact the customer's mouth.

## Packaging Leftovers (Doggy Bag)

If customers bring a takeaway container, they should transfer their leftover meal portions to their container at the dining table, preventing the container from entering the kitchen and contaminating food handling areas.

## Staff Service of Takeout (Deli Style) Foods

- Food service staff should be responsible for filling the container.
- Written procedures and staff training should state that the container should be clean and in good condition. If the container is touched, staff should not return the serving utensil to the bulk supply until it has been washed, rinsed, and sanitized.

- Surfaces where the customer's container has been placed (for example, a counter or scale) should be washed and sanitized after contact.
- For takeout foods, consider locations outside the kitchen to transfer foods to keep customer-returned containers out of the food handling area.

## Bulk-Style Self-Serve Foods

- Allow customers to use their own containers only for dry non-perishable bulk foods to reduce the risk of cross-contamination.
- Employ hopper-style bulk dispensers instead of scoops to minimize contact between the dispenser and the container.
- Increase staff supervision of bulk food areas to prevent misuse by customers.
- Display signage showing how to properly handle products and utensils to minimize contamination.

## Buffet-Style Self-Serve Foods

This type of service contains the highest risk of cross-contamination because the food is open and exposed, often perishable, and there is a lack of control over the customer's handling of foods and utensils. Customer-supplied containers should be discouraged for this type of service. However, consider the following if a restaurant allows customer containers for buffet-style service.

- Offer (trained) staff assistance for customers with their containers.
- Display signage to inform customers about the proper handling of products to minimize contamination.
- Supervise the buffet area. Staff should observe the condition of containers used and remove food or utensils potentially contaminated by contact with a customer container.
- Switch out utensils regularly.
- Follow recommendations for staff/deli style service (above) at the point of weighing/purchase.
- Consider a container exchange program or compostable containers as an alternative to customer-supplied containers.

## Container Exchange Programs

Some businesses may offer an exchange program for reusable food or beverage containers. Under this model, processing containers for reuse is entirely the business' responsibility. However, it can offer a way to mitigate cross-contamination risks. If a business is considering this option, they should:

- Develop a receiving procedure to ensure dirty containers are brought into the facility and stored in a manner that does not risk cross-contamination of food or food handling areas.
- Ensure clean and sanitized containers are stored appropriately to protect them from contamination.

## Practices that Support the Safe Use of Reusable Food Containers | 3

- Inspect containers for damage, discoloration, or contaminants before reprocessing. Reject damaged or contaminated containers for reuse.
- Thoroughly wash, rinse, and sanitize food-grade containers using methods meeting the requirements of Alberta's Food Regulation and the Food Retail and Food Services Code.

---

Contact us at 1-833-476-4743 or [submit a request online](#) at [ahs.ca/eph](#).

PUB-20230913

©2019 Alberta Health Services, Safe Healthy Environments



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International license](#). You are free to copy, distribute and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, as long as you attribute the work to Alberta Health Services and abide by the other license terms. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same, similar, or compatible license. The license does not apply to content for which the Alberta Health Services is not the copyright owner.

This material is intended for general information only and is provided on an "as is," "where is" basis. Although reasonable efforts were made to confirm the accuracy of the information, Alberta Health Services does not make any representation or warranty, express, implied or statutory, as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, applicability or fitness for a particular purpose of such information.