

OS/18: Vacuum packing of food

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The process of vacuum packing food removes air and prevents its return by way of an airtight seal surrounding the food within the packaging material itself.
- 1.2 Vacuum packing is a recognised method of increasing the shelf life of food by limiting the growth of food spoilage bacteria, however under certain circumstances non-proteolytic *Clostridium botulinum* may well grow in the absence of oxygen
- 1.3 Non-proteolytic *Clostridium botulinum* is a spore-forming bacterium and has the capacity to grow and produce a harmful toxin (most potent biological toxin known) at temperatures of above 3°C.
- 1.4 Inappropriate use of vacuum packing machines can present the risk of cross-contamination to 'ready-to-eat' foods which will compromise the health and wellbeing of consumers. For this reason rigid procedures must be identified, implemented and managed at all times, by all users.

2.0 Shelf life of vacuum packed food

- 2.1 The maximum shelf life given to any such food to be held in a chilled state must not exceed 5-days, owing to the fact that the following control measures cannot be applied and/or proven:
 - heat treatment e.g. time/temperature combination of 90°C for 10-minutes;
 - pH of 5 or less;
 - minimum salt level of 3.5%; and
 - water activity of 0.97 or less.
- 2.2 The shelf life of food must not be extended past that of the manufacturers'/suppliers' 'use-by' and/or 'best-before' date.
- 2.3 If food is to be frozen then a shelf life of 2 months must be identified and applied.

3.0 Vacuum packing machine and packaging

- 3.1 Where both raw and cooked foods are vacuum-packed on the same premises then there must be two separate machines in order to eliminate the risk of cross-contamination.
- 3.2 Vacuum packing machines used for raw foods must be located in an area where its use does not give rise to the potential contamination of cooked food, equipment and work surfaces.
- 3.3 Vacuum packing machines used for cooked foods must be located in an area where other processes, for example handling of raw foods would not give rise to the potential contamination of 'cooked' food and/or the machine itself.
- 3.4 Prior to using the vacuum packing machine it must be clean and in a good state of repair.
- 3.5 Packaging must be compatible with the machine and must be stored in a way that it cannot be contaminated by raw meats and/or poultry.

4.0 Vacuum packing of cooked foods

- 4.1 Cooked foods must be vacuum packed in a designated machine which shall be used for cooked foods only. Such machines must be easily identified by way of appropriate signage.

SECTION 2 - OPERATIONAL STANDARDS

4.2 Cooked foods must be packed as soon as possible after cooling has been completed.

4.3 Packaging must not be overfilled and allowed to spill out into the machine.

5.0 Vacuum packing of raw foods

5.1 Raw foods must be vacuum packed in a designated machine which shall be used for raw foods only. Such machines must be easily identified by way of appropriate signage.

5.2 Raw foods wherever possible must be devoid of excess blood which could give rise to spillage.

5.2 Packaging must not be overfilled and allowed to spill out into the machine or onto the outside of packaging.

6.0 Dating and labelling of foods

6.1 All foods on completion of packing must clearly show the following dates, wherever applicable:

- date of 'cooking';
- date of 'vacuum packing';
- departmental 'use-by' date; and
- manufacturers'/suppliers' dates.

7.0 Storage of vacuum packed foods

7.1 If food is to be placed into chilled storage it must be stored below 8°C.

7.3 If food is to be frozen then it must be stored at -18°C or below.

8.0 Cleaning and disinfection of machines

8.1 Vacuum packing machines must be cleaned and disinfected effectively after each use.

8.2 The correct cleaning and disinfection procedure must be adhered to at all times, a copy of which must be displayed adjacent to the machine. Refer to **HS/08: Vac-pack cleaning procedure**.

8.3 A record of cleaning and disinfection must be kept on the appropriate checklist, a copy of which must be displayed adjacent to the machine. Refer to **HS/09: Vac-pack cleaning checklist**.

8.4 The appropriate D10 sanitiser must be located adjacent to each machine.

8.5 Cloths and equipment used for the purpose of cleaning and disinfection must be clean and not give rise to contamination of the machine itself.

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