FOOD COMPLAINTS GUIDANCE
This leaflet provides information on the food complaints we deal with and how we investigate them.

**What is a food complaint?**

Things can go wrong in even the best run businesses, resulting in the food you've bought having an “added extra” that you just hadn’t expected. Food with foreign bodies, mould, insects, unusual tastes or odours can sometimes give cause for concern.

**What we can investigate**

The Food and Safety Division deals with complaints about food that is unfit to eat, injurious to health or contaminated with foreign matter.

The Trading Standards Division deal with complaints about food that is not of the substance, nature and quality it should be.

**Why we investigate food complaints**

We investigate food complaints in order to safeguard public health by trying to prevent the problem happening again.

We also assess whether there has been a breach of food safety legislation.

The purpose of our investigation is not to obtain compensation for you. We may, however, be able to advise you should you wish to take the matter further yourself.

If you think that the food has made you ill, contact your doctor for medical advice. If you work with food and you are ill you must tell your employer.

**How we investigate complaints**

If the food was bought in Swansea, then the department will investigate your food complaint no matter where you live. If your purchase was made elsewhere in the UK, arrangements can be made to transfer your complaint to the appropriate local authority.
We will examine the food or foreign body to try to determine exactly what the problem is, and try to establish where it arose. This may involve sending the food to an independent laboratory for testing to be carried out.

The premises where the food was bought may be contacted or visited to see if any similar food is on sale and if the food is properly stored and handled.

The manufacturers and suppliers of food may be contacted and asked to comment on the complaint.

We may also contact the food officers at the council in the manufacturer's area to give an independent view of food hygiene standards and discuss with them how the problem might have occurred.

If we can prove beyond all reasonable doubt how and why the problem occurred and a breach of food hygiene legislation has taken place, we will consider taking formal action. This may involve giving a warning or taking legal proceedings.

The Food Safety Act 1990 provides that a person who can prove that he took all reasonable precautions and exercised 'due diligence' to avoid committing an offence, can have a defence against prosecution.

Some complaints are dealt with by informal action. This is likely where there was a 'one off' problem which was unavoidable in an otherwise well run business and where improvements are made quickly to avoid similar problems occurring again.

You will be kept informed of the outcome of the investigation and action taken.

**How you can help**

- With transparent containers such as a glass jar or a plastic bag, a foreign body may be visible within the food before you open the container. In this case DO NOT OPEN the container. Removing the foreign body might destroy evidence.
• You may only become aware of a problem when you unwrap the food or even whilst eating it! It is important that you keep all the food, not just the foreign body. Place it in a suitable container e.g. a plastic bag or an airtight sandwich box and keep it in your fridge, taking care to place it where it can not drip or come into contact with other foods. If the foreign body is embedded in the food e.g. an insect in a slice of bread, do not try to remove it.

• Keep all the packaging, including the lids of cans, tops of packets etc., and the receipt if at all possible. They may be needed to identify the factory where the food was manufactured, or the date and time of manufacture.

• Remember - How the food was handled in the early stages of an investigation can affect certain tests which may need to be carried out. Do not handle the food more than necessary, and never touch a foreign body or dislodge it from the surrounding food.

How to Contact Us:

You can contact food officers or trading standards officers by telephoning the Environment Call Centre on 01792 635600 (Monday-Thursday 8.30am-5.00pm, Friday 8.30am-4.30pm).
Email: evh@swansea.gov.uk
Post: Food & Safety Division/ Trading Standards Division
    Directorate of Place
    Civic Centre
    Oystermouth Road
    Swansea
    SA1 3SN

Please ring before bringing your food complaint to us, as officers are not based at the Civic Centre. An officer will return your call, to discuss the complaint further and advise you on the most appropriate course of action.

If you would like this leaflet in Braille or large print please contact us using the details above.
**Common Food Complaints**

Many complaints where there is no risk to health can be resolved quickly by providing advice.

Included in this guidance are flow diagrams of some common food complaints together with a short explanation and suggestions for the best course of action.

**List of Food Complaint Tables**

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</tr>
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<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Investigating a Complaint**

Food complaint passed to Investigating Officer

Officer makes initial assessment of possible cause of complaint and any health risks arising from it. Photographs may also be taken at this stage.

**Complaint not justified:** A “foreign body” may turn out to be naturally part of the food. It is common to find that identification of a harmless object.

**Explanation given, no further action needed.**

**Interview/inspection at the retailer/local manufacturer:** A mouldy or out-of-date/unfit food may well indicate a fault at the point of sale.

**The purpose of a visit will be to see if any similar food is on sale and if the food is properly stored and handled.**

**Contact (National) manufacturer:** Where it can be shown that the complaint is due to a manufacturing fault, they will be contacted & asked to investigate the complaint further.

**We will ask for the findings of this investigation to be forwarded to us.**

**Informal action is likely where there was a ‘one off’ problem which was unavoidable in an otherwise well run business. Where improvements are made quickly to avoid problems occurring again informal action may be appropriate.**

**Refer to another examiner:** Failure to identify the complaint may necessitate the food to be submitted to another food examiner, e.g. the Public Analyst, for further testing.

**This will help us identify exact contaminants, substances etc.**

**Contamination can sometimes occur at the complainant’s house, following opening of the product. We must be able to eliminate this as the source of contamination.**

**Interview /inspection at the complainant’s home:** Foreign bodies such as glass or insect infestation may require elimination of your house as a possible source.

**We will only take further formal action (legal action) if we can prove beyond all reasonable doubt how and why the problem occurred and we are satisfied that a breach in food hygiene regulations has taken place.** This will include considering the seriousness of the offence, confidence in management i.e. history of compliance and action taken by the party concerned to remedy offence or to prevent reoccurrence.
### TABLE 1: TINNED FOODS & JARS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does it look like a maggot / grub?</td>
<td>Occasionally small grubs may be discovered in canned vegetables especially sweetcorn and tomatoes. The grubs are larvae of a moth which lives inside the sweetcorn kernel or tomato and are impossible to see before they are processed. Although it isn’t pleasant to find a grub in your food, they are killed and sterilised by the canning process. As the use of pesticides decreases, these types of problems will increase. <strong>No Public Health Risk</strong> <strong>Contact Manufacturer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it look like a bee/wasp/fly?</td>
<td>These are naturally associated with fruit and so often found in tins of fruit and fruit products e.g. jam, purees, fruit yoghurts etc. <strong>No Public Health Risk</strong> <strong>Contact Manufacturer</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it look like glass or crystals in a tinned fish product?</td>
<td>This could be struvite some naturally occurring elements in fish may develop hard crystals during the canning process. These crystals are not harmful and will be broken down by stomach acid if swallowed. Struvite is especially common in tinned salmon and will dissolve if placed in vinegar and gently heated for 15-20 minutes. Glass will not dissolve. <strong>No Public Health Risk if Struvite</strong> <strong>Contact Manufacturer</strong> <strong>Public Health Risk if Glass</strong> <strong>Contact Food &amp; Safety Division</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it look like white curd or coagulated egg in tinned fish?</td>
<td>On occasions white material resembling coagulated egg white may be found on the surface of flesh or embedded in the cavities between pieces of fish. The ‘curd’ is a protein like material which is present in raw salmon flesh and may separate out after cooking. The presence of the protein presents no public health risk. <strong>No Public Health Risk</strong> <strong>No Action Necessary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it look like mould?</td>
<td>Dented, damaged or incorrectly processed tins may allow mould growth to occur. Similarly cartons used to sell fruit juice etc, may become damaged at some point. Damaging to the packaging seal may allow air to enter the product and mould to grow. This could indicate an error in production or storage. <strong>Possible Public Health Risk</strong> <strong>Contact Food &amp; Safety Division</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 2: FRUIT AND VEGETABLES- FRESH/FROZEN

Are there stones, soil, slugs on the product?

Yes

Fruit and vegetables commonly have soils, stones or small slugs adhering to them. This is quite normal as they originate from soil.

No Public Health Risk
Ensure you wash all fruit & vegetables thoroughly before eating

No

Does it look like Greenfly?

Yes

Salad vegetables especially lettuce may have greenfly or other insects attached. This is becoming more common as the use of pesticides decreases, but they are not harmful.

No Public Health Risk
Ensure you wash all salad items

No

Does it look like mould?

Yes

Mould growth occurs when fruit and vegetables become bruised or damaged. This will be minimised if the buyer checks the produce before purchase and handles it carefully afterwards.

Return to Retailer

No
TABLE 3: DRIED FOODS

Are there small insects in flour, sugar or pulses?

Yes

Dried products such as flour, sugar and pulses may contain small insects such as psocids (book lice). These do not carry disease but are unsightly and can eat through the paper of the packet. They breed very quickly in warm, humid conditions and so spread into uncontaminated food very quickly.

Throw away all affected food, clean cupboards with bleach solution (follow advice on bottle) and dry thoroughly before putting food back. Store new dried foods in airtight containers.

Ensure good ventilation in kitchen/store cupboards

No

Does your product contain insects such as weevils, beetles, moths, larvae etc?

Yes

Dried products can be infested with insects as a result of poor harvesting, inappropriate transport and storage conditions before and after sale.

Whilst there is generally no public health risk an investigation may be appropriate to ensure food is being handled and stored correctly throughout the food chain. The food safety team will investigate insect food complaints providing the problem is discovered when first opening the product packaging and the durability date hasn’t expired.

Minimal Public Health Risk
Contact Food Safety Team for Advice

No

Does it look like there is a fingernail in your food?

Yes

If your product contains dried onions, these can sometimes be mistaken for finger or toe nails.

No Public Health Risk if Dried Onion
Contact Food Safety Team if you suspect it is a Nail
TABLE 4: BAKERY GOODS

Does your product contain black/greyish bits?  
Yes: Bread and cakes may contain bits of overcooked dough which has flaked off bakery tins. It does not necessarily indicate poor hygiene although they may be mistaken for rodent droppings which are black and regular torpedo shape, whilst bakery char is greyish and uneven in shape.
No Public Health Risk
Contact Manufacturer
Contact Food & Safety if you suspect Rodent Droppings

Mouldy Bread

Is the bread within its Best Before date?  
Yes: If bread is packaged too hot, this can allow mould growth to develop in advance of the best before date, this can sometimes occur on a hot summers day when temperatures are high and the bread is packaged before adequately cooling down.
No Public Health Risk
Contact Manufacturer
Contact Food & Safety Division for Advice

Does the bread smell of nail varnish remover?  
Yes: This type of odour is commonly associated with contamination of the bread post bake with wild yeast. After contaminating bread, this yeast produces, amongst other compounds, ethyl acetate. This has a highly characteristic nail varnish remover odour. It is not unusual for bakeries to receive an isolated complaint of this nature during the warmer months.
No Public Health Risk
Contact Manufacturer

Does your product have a grey/greasy appearance?  
Yes: The machinery used to produce bread and cakes is lubricated with non toxic vegetable oil. Occasionally, some of this may become incorporated into the dough giving the product a grey/greasy appearance.
No Public Health Risk
Contact Manufacturer

No: No further action necessary.
TABLE 5: MEAT AND POULTRY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skin, small bone fragments</td>
<td>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. They may sometimes cause problems such as a chipped tooth and these are best dealt with by the individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large bone fragments</td>
<td>These may pose a health hazard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat / poultry smells off</td>
<td>Is meat packaged in a protective/modified atmosphere? (Should state on the pack) If there is any damage to the packaging, this would allow oxygen to get into the pack which would speed up bacterial growth allowing the meat to deteriorate/go off at a quicker rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does it taste funny?</td>
<td>Does the meat have a marinade or flavour?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your mince meat very fatty?</td>
<td>There are legal limits for the composition and labelling of minced meat.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No Public Health Risk
Contact Retailer or Supplier

Potential Public Health Risk
Contact Food & Safety Division

Check Packaging for unusual ingredients.
Contact Food & Safety Division

Contact Trading Standards Officer
**TABLE 6: FRESH/FROZEN FISH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does it look like a small round brownish/yellow worm?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White fish such as cod or haddock may be infested with a small, round brownish/yellow worm found in the flesh.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are killed by cooking and are harmless to humans. The affected parts of the fish are usually cut away, but some may be missed.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No Public Health Risk</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contact Retailer or Supplier</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Calcium Lactate crystals appear naturally in some cheeses, particularly hard, matured or vintage cheese.

The salt crystals form naturally when lactic acid and calcium combine during the drying out and ripening process. There is no health risk associated with the crystals as they are part of the natural make up of the cheese.

**No Public Health Risk if Calcium Lactate Crystals**

**Public Health Risk if Glass**

**Contact Food & Safety Division**

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Sometimes you may find your yoghurt is slightly discoloured in some way (e.g. red colouring in vanilla yoghurt). This may be due to factories producing a variety of flavours. It is possible for cross contamination to occur between production runs of different flavours (e.g. strawberry and vanilla).

**Contact Food & Safety Division for Advice**

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Has the cheese been packaged in a protective/modified atmosphere? The packaging may have been damaged at some point during the distribution chain which would have let oxygen into the pack which would speed up bacterial growth allowing the cheese to deteriorate at a quicker rate.

**Return to Retailer**
**TABLE 8: CHOCOLATE/CONFECTIONARY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Light coloured bloom</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Chocolate may develop a light coloured bloom on the surface if stored at too high a temperature. It is not mould but is due to fat separation and is not harmful.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                      | No  | **No Public Health Risk**  
|                      |     | **Return to Retailer**                                                  |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does it look like glass?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Large sugar crystals may form in confectionary and may be mistaken for glass. The crystals will dissolve in warm water.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                           | No  | **No Public Health Risk if Crystals**  
|                           |     | **Public Health Risk if Glass Contact Food & Safety Division**                                                     |
**TABLE 9: MISCELLANEOUS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have found a foreign body in your product, is it blue coloured?</td>
<td>Blue packaging is used in catering premises for this purpose, as it is easier to identify if it gets into any food. Packaging however, should still not get into your food. Contact Food &amp; Safety Division</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is your complaint regarding best before or use by date?</td>
<td>'Best before' dates appear on a wide range of frozen, dried, tinned and other foods. The 'best before' dates are more about quality than safety, except for eggs. So when the date runs out it doesn't mean that the food will be harmful, but it might begin to lose its flavour and texture. <strong>No Public Health Risk (Unless Eggs)</strong> You will see 'use by' dates on food that goes off quickly, such as smoked fish, meat products and ready-prepared salads. Don't use any food or drink after the end of the 'use by' date on the label, even if it looks and smells fine. This is because using it after this date could put your health at risk. Contact Food &amp; Safety Division</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>