

Donating food to emergency services

October 2015

There are many ways to help during an emergency – either as a volunteer or as a donor.

Preparing food for others is a natural response in an emergency, but it is not often practical for emergency services to accept donated ready-to-eat food during emergencies.

If you'd like to donate food or help in any other way, contact Red Cross, a local emergency service organisation, or your council to determine the best way to assist.

Why food safety matters in an emergency

Emergencies are unpredictable, and the risk of food poisoning is often greater than usual at these times. While the Food Act doesn't prohibit people from donating food to emergency services organisations, there are some important issues to consider.

It's vital that emergency workers remain healthy when they're attending to disasters. It is also important that members of the community affected by a disaster don't suffer extra hardship as a result of food poisoning.

Here are some specific food safety issues to consider in an emergency situation:

- Even if donated food is prepared safely in your home, emergency services cannot always guarantee safe storage, handling and distribution of donated ready-to-eat food in emergency conditions. For example, there may not be access to a reliable refrigerator or space in available storage facilities, or clean running water for hand-washing that would be required to ensure food is safe to eat.
- Food poisoning bacteria are often naturally present in food, even if the food looks, tastes and smells normal. Some donated foods (for example, sandwiches with cold meats, smallgoods, soups and casseroles) can quickly become unsafe when

not refrigerated or eaten immediately, especially in warm weather.

How can I help?

- Always check with your local emergency services before donating to ensure they have the capacity to receive, store and distribute the goods. They can advise you of the kinds of donations they are able to accept under their guidelines. For example, they may not be in a position to accept food donated for front line workers, such as fire-fighters.
- Many emergency services organisations coordinate their own catering and need volunteers to help with food preparation and service in their on-site "kitchens".
- Businesses and individuals can offer to donate shelf-stable foods (for example, tinned foods, biscuits, cereals and bottled water) that do not need to be kept under a controlled temperature.
- Organisations such as the Red Cross always welcome financial donations to support emergency management and recovery. The Department of Health and Human Services has developed a series of tips and checklists to keep food safe in an emergency. They are available at www.health.vic.gov.au/foodsafety/bus/emergency_situations.htm

For specific information about how best to help during an emergency, contact your local council or visit www.redcross.org.au/emergency-services.aspx

Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne. October 2015.

Information jointly prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services and Red Cross.