

# Common Food Complaints

Discovering a foreign object in food or other problems with food can be a very unpleasant experience, however, not all pose a serious health risk and there are a few simple steps that you can take to resolve the problem yourself. This document gives some common food complaints together with a short explanation on how they occur and suggestions for the best course of action.

The information provided in this document is intended as a self-help guide for consumers and local businesses to help you to solve common issues that occur routinely in items of food. The aim of this guide is to enable our food safety officers to concentrate on more serious issues that pose a potential risk to public health.

If you are unable to resolve the problem that you have by reading our self-help guide and following the steps suggested, please contact us by email at [psr@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:psr@newcastle.gov.uk) or phone at 0191 2116102. You can contact us about food you have purchased in the city of Newcastle.

**When making a complaint to us, please make sure you have the food in question (and the foreign object), details of where and when it was purchased and how it has been stored.** We are, however unable to get involved in compensation claims following a food complaint.

You can also contact us about hygiene standards in a food premises within the City of Newcastle area. All complaints about hygiene standards in premises are evaluated for potential public health risk and an appropriate response taken. We will only deal with complaints where there is a potential public health risk. We are unable to deal with complaints unless we are provided with contact details such as a valid email address, contact telephone number or your full postal address.

If you think you are suffering from **food poisoning** you should consult your GP, who will arrange for you to submit a stool sample for analysis. Whilst you are symptomatic, you may be excreting live bacteria which could infect other people, be particularly careful with handwashing at this time. You should not return to work until you have been symptom free for 48 hours.

If your job involves handling food, or working with vulnerable people, you should inform your employer. It is recommended that you continue to avoid handling food for 48 hours after your symptoms have stopped.

If you have become ill after attending an event where a number of other people have become ill with similar symptoms, please contact us immediately.

## **Contents**

Canned foods	5
Field insects, wasps and fruit flies	5
Stones in canned peas	5
Larvae/Grubs in canned vegetables	5
White spots in tinned grapefruit	6
Mould	6
Glass-like crystals in canned fish - Struvite	6
Fish	7
Glowing fish - Luminous marine bacteria	7
Cod worm	8
Fish bones	8
Sea lice	8
Vegetables & Fruit	9
Stones, soil & slugs	9
Greenfly	9
Mould	9
Spiders in bananas	9
Mushroom fibres/Hair	10
Cardamom pods in pilau rice	10
Insects in jam	10
Larvae in frozen vegetables	11
Mould in juice and food cartons	11
Chocolate/Confectionery	12
Bloom	12

Crystals	12
Dried foods	12
Insects	12
Psocids - Small insects in flour	13
Bakery goods	14
Bakery Char	
Carbonised grease	14
Meat & Poultry	14
Skin, bone or other animal material	15
Chicken	15
Red leg	15
Oregon disease or deep pectoral myopathy	15
Cooked and cured meat and poultry	16
Ham	16
Wine	16
Crystals	16
Corked Wine	16
General Issues	16
Hair in Food	16
Durability dates	17
'Use by date'	17
'Minimum durability date'/Previously known as 'Best before dates'	17
Other dates	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Labelling and allergen labelling requirements	18
Allergen labelling	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

## **Canned foods**

### **Field insects, wasps and fruit flies**

Insects that live naturally in fields may be harvested along with fruit and vegetables. Whilst food companies take steps to remove these insects, some will slip through the net. These insects and grubs are killed and sterilised by the canning process.

**Action:** Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there is no public health risk. You may contact the retailer and/or the manufacturer using the details on the can.

### **Stones in canned peas**

During harvesting, sometimes small stones can be accidentally collected too. Stones of certain size, weight and appearance can be missed during the sorting process. Provided the manufacturer can show that all reasonable precautions were taken to try to stop this from happening, it is accepted that a number of these complaints will occur.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. If you have damaged a tooth or cut your mouth as a result of stones in food, we cannot act on your behalf in these matters. You may contact the manufacturer and also seek legal advice from a Solicitor if necessary.

### **Larvae/Grubs in canned vegetables**

Small grubs are often found in canned vegetables, particularly tomatoes and sweetcorn. Their colour is often cream to greenish brown with long dark and pale bands, but this is variable. They can be up to 4cm in length. People think they may be maggots or caterpillars. These are moth larvae that live inside the food and are difficult to see during growing and processing. The larvae are killed and sterilised by the canning process, so they are not a health risk. Every effort is made to control these pests while crops are growing. They may be found in food as the use of pesticides in food crops has decreased and there is an increase in the use of organic produce, where crops are not sprayed with any chemicals.

**Action:** Although unpleasant to find a grub in the food, there is no public health risk. You may contact the manufacturer.

### **White spots in tinned grapefruit**

Sometimes, tinned grapefruit will be covered in white spots that look like mould and the liquid in the tin may be cloudy. This is actually a natural constituent of the grapefruit called "Naringin" and it gives the fruit its distinctive bitter taste. Variations in the weather cause an increase in the amount of Naringin that the fruit contains and when canned, this excess Naringin crystallizes out. The product is safe to eat.

**Action:** You may contact the manufacturer but there is no public health risk.

### **Mould**

Dented, damaged or incorrectly processed cans may allow mould growth to occur. This could indicate an error in production and poor handling during storage or distribution. It is difficult to establish who is responsible for this type of damage to canned foods. Affected foods should not be consumed.

**Action:** Do not consume the food. Although unsightly there is very little we can do with this type of complaint, it is best to return the affected food to the retailer or manufacturer.

### **Glass-like crystals in canned fish - Struvite**

Certain naturally occurring elements commonly found in fish may develop into hard crystals during the canning process. They are a harmless compound of magnesium ammonium phosphate. It is especially common in canned salmon. These crystals may be mistaken for glass fragments and are called struvite. They are not harmful and will be broken down by stomach acids when swallowed.

You can tell the difference between Struvite and glass by doing simple tests at home; Struvite crystals are softer than glass and can be scratched or crushed between two hard surfaces, such as two spoons, into a

powder. If you look under a magnifying glass the edges are smooth where broken glass will be irregular.

Struvite crystals are soluble in a hot dilution of vinegar or lemon juice and water when gently heated for 15-20 minutes (the crystals will not dissolve completely in this time but will reduce in size). Glass will not dissolve. Despite the large volumes of fish produced each year finding struvite is quite rare. As yet no procedure has been successful in preventing it happening, even the addition of polyphosphates is not 100% effective and most people do not want any more additives in food.

**Action:** You should heat the crystal gently in vinegar or lemon juice and water for 15-20 minutes. If the crystal does not dissolve or crush, then it could be glass, please contact us for advice. If the crystal dissolves it is struvite and there is no public health risk, we would advise you to eat the product as normal, but if you are still concerned, you may contact the manufacturer of the product.

## **Fish**

### **Glowing fish - Luminous marine bacteria**

Luminous bacteria can sometimes be found on seafood such as crabmeat, cooked shrimps, prawns, or processed seafood products made from Surimi. This suggests that the seafood was held for a time at a temperature that allowed the bacteria to grow. When seafood glows, it means that luminous bacteria are present. The light is produced by a reaction with a substance in the bacteria and oxygen and water. It does not mean the seafood is unsafe or of low quality. There are no reports of illness from luminous marine bacteria growing on seafood, and they are not radioactive

**Action:** You may contact the retailer/manufacturer. There is no public health risk.

## **Cod worm**

White fish such as cod or haddock may be infested with small, round brownish-yellow worms found in the flesh. These worms are known scientifically as *Phocanema decipiens*.

There is no evidence that anyone has ever had an illness associated with the cod worm. The worms are killed by the cooking and freezing process and are harmless. The affected parts of the fish are usually cut away but occasionally some may be missed in fresh fish and a worm may be discovered alive. This may be alarming to see though the worms are harmless if consumed. The incidence of infected fish is very small in relation to the thousands of tonnes of fish landed each year.

**Action:** You may contact the retailer or supplier. There is no public health risk.

## **Fish bones**

Fish naturally contain bones. Whilst the manufacturers take every care to remove these bones, in products such as fish fingers and other processed fish products a few may remain due to the way that the products are manufactured. Bones from a certain part of the fish may resemble a piece of plastic, being broad, flat and flexible in appearance. Provided that the manufacturer has taken all reasonable steps to remove the bones, then we cannot take formal action.

**Action:** You may contact the retailer, supplier or manufacturer. There is no public health risk.

## **Sea lice**

Sea lice refers to several species of parasitic copepods that are commonly found on fish in the marine environment. They have been found in salmon, stickleback, herring and rainbow trout. The lice usually fall off or are cleaned off during harvesting or processing.

**Action:** Sea lice do not affect human health. There is no public health risk.

## **Vegetables & Fruit**

### **Stones, soil & slugs**

Fruit and vegetables commonly have soil, stones or small slugs and snails adhering to them. This is quite normal as they originate in the soil. These can even be found in prewashed vegetables.

**Action:** You should wash all fruit and vegetables thoroughly before eating them. There is no public health risk.

### **Greenfly**

Salad vegetables (especially lettuce) may have greenfly attached. Greenfly are not harmful and can be difficult to wash off salad vegetables. They are becoming more common as the use of pesticides decreases.

**Action:** Wash all salad items thoroughly. There is no public health risk.

### **Mould**

Mould growth will naturally occur when fruit and vegetables become damaged and bruised, or if stored for too long.

**Action:** Do not consume mouldy fruit or vegetables. Check produce before you purchase it and handle it carefully after purchase. Contact the retailer if you need to make a complaint.

### **Spiders in bananas**

Sometimes, spiders can come to Britain in fruit, vegetables and other products. The Huntsman or Giant Crab Spiders are large, brown, crab-like spiders that have flattened bodies that enable them to fit into very small crevices. These spiders live in tropical and subtropical regions and are common in houses where they eat cockroaches and other insects, but not Europe where it is too cold. They are transported throughout the world in banana shipments.

**Action:** They are harmless but can deliver a painful bite if carelessly handled. In the unlikely event that you are bitten contact a doctor. To remove the spider – once it is on a flat surface, gently place a cup over it

and then slide a piece of card between the cup and the surface. Take the spider outside, a good distance away from your home and gently set it free.

### **Mushroom fibres/Hair**

Sometimes we receive complaints about hairs in food such as pizza, often these 'hairs' turn out to be mushroom fibres. The mushroom that we know is actually the fruiting body of the hidden mushroom plant. This plant is made up of microscopic filaments (hyphae) which combine to form strands called **mycelium**. The mycelium grows in the soil on wood and leaves, or in compost. The mushroom body first develops as a tiny ball on the mycelium and grows to a certain size before being picked to eat. Sometimes, strands of mycelium can remain with the mushroom during preparation and cooking. When cooked, the fibrous mycelium can look like a coarse hair.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. You may contact the retailer/manufacturer.

### **Cardamom pods in pilau rice**

Cardamom pods are sometimes mistaken by members of the public as rodent droppings or insects. Cardamom is the common name for certain plant species native to India and south-eastern Asia. The fruit (pod) is a small capsule with 8 to 16 brown seeds, the seeds are used as a spice or the pods can be used whole in pilau rice.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. Cardamom pods can either be removed or eaten.

### **Cinnamon Sticks in pilau rice**

Cinnamon sticks are sometimes mistaken by members of the public as a piece of wood if found in food. Cinnamon is commonly used to flavour a variety of foods.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. The cinnamon can be removed from the food and the food eaten as normal.

## **Insects in jam**

These are usually wasps or fruit flies. These insects are naturally associated with fruit and fruit growing areas. As they are small and light, some will inevitably get past the inspection process. They do not carry disease and are not a health risk.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. You may contact the retailer/manufacturer.

## **Larvae in frozen vegetables**

The same information for larvae in canned foods (above) applies to frozen foods.

**Action:** Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there is no public health risk. You may contact the manufacturer.

## **Mould in juice and food cartons**

Cardboard juice and food cartons may become dented and damaged if poorly handled during distribution and storage. This damage can cause small holes to occur in the seams of the carton.

The holes allow air to enter the carton causing mould to grow in the food or juice inside the carton.

The holes are difficult to detect, and it is only upon opening the carton that the mould is discovered. It is difficult to establish who is responsible for this type of damage to cardboard juice and food cartons.

**Action:** Affected foods should not be consumed. Contact the manufacturer or retailer.

## **Mould Cont'd**

There may also be other causes of mould growth such as if a product is out of date or has been stored for too long at the wrong temperature. Please check the following information:

- the use by date on the product
- the storage time after you opened the product

- has the product been stored correctly after opening, check the label for the instructions
- has the product passed the storage period set by the manufacturer once it is opened?
- always read the manufacturer's instructions on the product packaging.

The mould growth may not be the fault of the manufacturer or retailer.

**Action:** Affected foods should not be consumed. You may contact the retailer or manufacturer.

## **Chocolate / Confectionery**

### **Bloom**

Chocolate may develop a light-coloured bloom if stored at too high a temperature. It is not mould but due to fat separation within the product and it is not harmful.

**Action:** You may contact the retailer or manufacturer. There is no public health risk.

### **Crystals**

Large crystals may form in confectionery and may be mistaken for glass. The crystals will dissolve in warm water.

**Action:** You should test with warm water if the crystals dissolve, there is no public health risk. You may return the product to the retailer or manufacturer. If the crystals do not dissolve, there may be a public health risk, please contact the food safety team by email at [psr@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:psr@newcastle.gov.uk)

### **Dried foods**

#### **Insects**

Insects like beetles and weevils may infest dried products such as flour, sugar, milk powder, semolina and pulses if they are stored for too long.

These insects do not carry disease, but they breed very quickly in warm, humid conditions and spread into uncontaminated food very quickly.

**Action:** These insects are not a public health risk. Do not use an insecticide because of the danger of contaminating your food but dispose of all visibly infested packages in an outside waste bin. Thoroughly clean the cupboards using a vacuum cleaner paying particular attention to crevices and the edges of shelves. Immediately afterwards, empty the vacuum cleaner into an outside waste bin. Store new dried goods in airtight containers and ensure good ventilation of storage areas.

### **Psocids - Small insects in flour**

Psocids are very, very small grey or brown insects which are only very occasionally found in dry foods like flour, milk powder, sugar, semolina, etc. and because of this you may see them in your kitchen cupboards too. They are harmless insects about 1-2mm long, which can survive in dry powdery foods. They are not due to poor hygiene. They prefer dark, warm, humid places and can be found in the folds of food packaging in kitchen cupboards. They eat a wide variety of dried food products such as flour, cereals and the microscopic moulds that develop in humid conditions. They live for about six months, during which time they can lay up to 100 eggs. They breed very quickly and so spread into uncontaminated food very quickly.

#### **Action:**

There is no public health risk.

- Do not use an insecticide
- All affected food should be removed and thrown away in a bin outside.
- Check all remaining food including the packaging and labels and throw away as necessary.

- Thoroughly clean the cupboard using a damp cloth with a mild sterilising solution (following the instructions on the bottle. Avoid using bleach and disinfectant solutions as these may taint food).
- Dry the cupboard thoroughly before food is returned to the cupboard. Use a hairdryer if necessary.
- New dried foods should be stored in airtight containers.
- Keep the kitchen and food storage cupboards well ventilated and dry.

If you have only just purchased the product from a retailer and you believe the problem came from there, you may wish to contact the retailer.

### **Bakery goods**

#### **Bakery char**

Bread and cakes may contain irregular shaped bits of overcooked dough which has flaked off bakery tins. If the flakes or drops become incorporated within the dough, they may be mistaken for rodent droppings. However rodent droppings are black, and torpedo shaped whilst bakery char would be uneven in shape.

**Action:** This is not a public health risk. You may contact the retailer or manufacturer to discuss.

#### **Carbonised grease in bread/cakes/pizza**

The machinery used to produce these products are lubricated with a non-toxic vegetable oil. Occasionally some may become incorporated into dough giving areas of the product a grey/greasy appearance and you may suspect there is dirt or oil in the food.

**Action:** This is not a public health risk. You may contact the retailer or manufacturer.

### **Meat & Poultry**

## **Skin, bone or other animal material**

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.

**Action:** This is not a public health risk. If you have damaged a tooth or cut your mouth on a small bone or a piece of animal tooth in food, we cannot act on your behalf in these matters. You should contact the manufacturer and/or seek legal advice from a solicitor if necessary.

**Note:** It is very rare for prohibited parts of an animal e.g. eyes, eyelids, genitals or non-food animals e.g. cats and dogs to be used for human food. Meat such as chicken and beef are readily available and relatively inexpensive. It is very rare for food businesses to make use of prohibited parts of food animals or non-food species.

## **Chicken**

### **Red leg**

A natural pigment within the bone of chicken may be released after cooking and the meat may have the appearance of not being correctly cooked. The chicken will be thoroughly cooked but the temperature upon cooking will not have been high enough to denature the pigment.

**Action:** Ensure that the chicken is thoroughly cooked by checking that the juices are running clear. This is not a public health risk.

### **Oregon disease or deep pectoral myopathy**

This is a condition of Turkeys and Chickens (Broilers). It is caused by a reduction in blood supply to the deep pectoral muscles. The lesion is apple green and is retained upon cooking. The colour is not noticed until the bird is carved after cooking.

**Action:** It is unsightly but there is no public health risk. You may contact the retailer or manufacturer.

## **Cooked and cured meat and poultry**

### **Discoloured Ham**

Ham cooked in a Panini may be discoloured after cooking. This may be because the "cure" (nitrite level) was not as high as it could have been. This is a quality issue. Also, the ripening flora of the cheese in the Panini can produce very small quantities of hydrogen peroxide, which when combined with the ham, can cause discolouration.

**Action:** There is no public health risk. You may contact the retailer or manufacturer.

### **Wine**

#### **Crystals**

Tartrate Crystals (known as "wine diamonds") are a natural product of wine which form when the wine gets too cold. The crystals may be sifted out of the wine. They are not harmful.

**Action:** If you believe it is not tartrate crystals in your wine, but glass contamination, please contact the food safety team by email at [psr@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:psr@newcastle.gov.uk)

#### **Corked Wine**

Occasionally the taste of a bottle of wine may be affected by the cork used to seal the bottle or have a 'musty' smell. This is caused by "Trichlorinanisole" (TCA). It is extremely difficult to detect during manufacture and bottling but can be detected by the human nose at just one part per million.

**Action:** This is not a public health risk. You may contact the manufacturer or retailer.

### **General Issues**

#### **Hair in Food**

The presence of hair in food can be an indication of poor hygiene practices.

**Action:** If you believe that you have found human hair in food, please contact the food safety team by email at [psr@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:psr@newcastle.gov.uk)

## **Durability dates**

### **'Use by date'**

'Use by' means that a food must be used/consumed by the stated date. You should not use any food or drink after the end of the 'use by' date shown on the label. Even if it looks and smells fine the food may be unsafe. You will usually find a 'use by' date on food such as cooked and cured meats, milk, soft cheese, ready-prepared salads, ready-prepared meals and smoked fish. All of which are stored chilled in a fridge.

It is important to follow any storage instructions on food labels, otherwise the food might not last until the 'use by' date. Some labels also give instructions such as 'eat within '2-3 days' or a 'week after opening' it is important to follow these instructions. But remember, if the '**use by**' date is tomorrow, then you must use the food by the end of tomorrow even if the label says 'eat within a week of opening' and you have only opened the food today.

It is an offence for food businesses to sell or use food that has passed its use by date.

You may also see 'Display until' and 'sell by' dates on labels which are instructions for shop staff to tell them when they should take a product off the shelves. For fresh fruit and vegetables these may be the only dates shown, as they usually do not need a "Best Before" date. On other foods it may be in addition to the "Use By" or "Best Before" date shown.

**Action:** If you have a complaint about food being sold past its use by date please contact the food safety team by email at [psr@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:psr@newcastle.gov.uk)

### **'Minimum durability date'/Previously known as 'Best before dates'**

'Minimum durability dates' are usually used on foods that last longer, such as frozen, dried or canned foods. On a label this will be identified as the 'Best Before date'. This means that the food will be best if eaten

before the given date but should be safe to eat after the ' minimum durability' date. The food may no longer be at its best. The quality may be affected as the food might begin to lose its flavour and texture.

**Eggs** must be used within 2 days of their minimum durability date.

It is not an offence for food businesses to sell food that has passed its minimum durability date. However, it is an offence if a food business sells or uses food past its best before date if the food is mouldy, contaminated, or in a poor condition.

**Action:** This is not a public health risk. You may contact the retailer or manufacturer.

### **Labelling and allergen labelling requirements**

The fundamental rule of the labelling of foodstuffs is that consumers should be informed and not misled. When products are prepacked they must have detailed food labelling such as the ingredients, the durability date and any storage conditions. This informs consumers as to the exact nature and characteristics of the foodstuff and enables them to make a more informed choice.

When food is packed for sale and sold at the same premises, the labelling requirements require less information and in a catering premises such as a takeaway or sandwich shop where food is sold loose, it is not required to be labelled. A food business must still be able to tell you what is in the food and how they have made it. With regards to allergens, as a customer you should always ask.

**Action:** Further information about food labelling can be found on the Food Standards Agency website. [www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

For information about the allergen labelling requirements please visit the Food Standards Agency website: [www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/food-allergy-and-intolerance](http://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/food-allergy-and-intolerance)