Common Food Complaints

South Norfolk and Broadland Councils

Food, Safety & Licensing Team
E: foodandsafety@southnorfolkandbroadland.gov.uk
T: 01603 430488

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# 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. Here are some

common food complaints together with a short explanation and suggestions for the

best course of action. The information provided in this document is intended as a

self-help guide for residents and local businesses to help you to solve common

issues that occur routinely in items of food. The aim of this guide is save time so that

our food safety officers can 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 please contact the Food Safety Team using the details on page 1.

You can complain to us about food you have purchased in a food premises and food

poisoning. If you suspect you have food poisoning, you should contact your doctor

and arrange to submit a faecal sample. We will only deal with complaints where

there is a potential public health risk. We can only investigate complaints about

hygiene standards in food businesses and food purchased from businesses that are

based in the South Norfolk or Broadland area.

This document provides a brief summary of some of the problems that consumers may find associated with foods that they buy and has been adapted from information kindly supplied by the London Borough of Bromley.

# 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. There

is no public health risk.

**Recommendation:**Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there is no

public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer.

**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. As

long as 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.

**Recommendation:**There is no public health risk. You should contact the

manufacturer. 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 should contact the

manufacturer and 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. But you may find these larvae 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. There is no public

health risk.

**Recommendation:**Although unpleasant to find a grub in the food. You should

contact the manufacturer; there is no public health risk.

**White spots in tinned grapefruit**

Sometimes, tinned grapefruit will be covered in white specks that look like mould.

Also, the liquid in the tin may be cloudy. This is 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 the fruit contains and

when canned, this excess Naringin crystallizes out. The product is safe to eat and

there is no health risk.

**Recommendation:**You should contact the manufacturer, 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.

**Recommendation:**This may be 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.

There is no public health risk.

**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

maybe 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 into a powder.

If you look under a magnifying glass the edges are smooth where broken glass will

be irregular. (Image from stoke.gov.uk)

Struvite crystals are soluble in a hot dilution of vinegar or lemon juice and water

when gently heated for up for 15-20 minutes (the crystals will not dissolve completely

in this time but will reduce in size). Glass will not dissolve. Finding Struvite is actually

quite rare, despite the large volumes of fish produced each year. 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.

**Recommendation:**You should heat 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 there is no public

health risk, we would advise you to eat the product as normal, but if you are still

concerned, please contact the manufacturer of the product.

# Fish

 **Glowing fish - Luminous marine bacteria**

Luminous bacteria can sometimes be found on seafood. Crabmeat, cooked shrimps,

prawns, or processed seafood products made from Surimi. These are the most

common seafood associated with luminescence or glowing. 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, oxygen and water, similar to

the reaction which makes fireflies glow. 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!

**Recommendation:**You should contact the manufacturer / retailer. 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, 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, the worms are harmless if consumed. There is no public health risk. The

incidence of infected fish is very small in relation to the thousands of tonnes of fish

landed each year.

**Recommendation:**You should 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 product 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. If the manufacturer has taken all reasonable steps to

remove the bones, then we cannot take formal action.

**Recommendation:**You should 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.

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

risk.

# Vegetables & Fruit

**Stones, soil, slugs and insects**

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.

**Recommendation:**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. The greenfly are not a public health

risk.

**Recommendation:**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. Do not consume mouldy fruit or vegetables.

**Recommendation:**We recommend that you check the produce before purchase

and handle it carefully after purchase. Contact the retailer if you need to make a

complaint. There is no public health risk.

**Spiders in bananas / grapes**

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. This spider lives in

tropical and subtropical regions and is common in houses where they eat

cockroaches and other insects, but not Europe where it is too cold. It is transported

throughout the world in banana shipments, it is harmless, but a large one can deliver

a painful bite if carelessly handled.

**Recommendation:**In the unlikely event that you are bitten contact a doctor.

**Mushroom fibres / Hair**

Sometimes we get 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 commercial mushroom farming, 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.

**Recommendation:**There is no public health risk. Contact the retailer or

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.

**Recommendation:**There is no public health risk.

**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 processes. They do not carry disease and are not a health risk.

**Recommendation:**We recommend that you check the produce before purchase

and return to the retailer. There is no public health risk.

**Larvae in frozen vegetables**

The same information for larvae in canned foods applies to frozen foods, these are

not harmful.

**Recommendation:**Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there is no

public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer.

**Mould in juice and food cartons**

Cardboard juice and food cartons may become dented and damaged if poorly

handled during storage and distribution. This damage can cause small holes

to occur in the seams of the carton which 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. Affected foods should not be consumed.

**Recommendation:**Contact the manufacturer or retailer. There is no public

health risk.

There may also be other causes of mould growth, so please check the following

information first - what is the use by date on the product, or storage time after

opening the product and has the product been stored correctly after opening?

Has the product passed the storage period set by the manufacturer once it is

opened? Please read the manufacturer’s instructions on the product

packaging. It is possible that mould will grow if a product is out of date or has

been stored for too long at the wrong temperature. This may not be the fault

of the manufacturer or retailer. Affected foods should not be consumed.

**Recommendation:**Contact the manufacturer or retailer. There is no public

health risk.

If the juice carton has no physical signs of damage to the outside of the carton

and is not out of date and has been stored at the correct temperature after

opening evidence of mould in the juice or food may be a result of poor food

hygiene during production and may warrant a formal investigation. Affected

foods should not be consumed.

**Recommendation:**If you have followed the guidance in points 1 and 2 and

you think that point 3 applies to the product you have please contact the Food

Safety Team as there may be a public health risk.

# 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 and is not harmful.

**Recommendation:**You should return the product to 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.

**Recommendation:**You should test with warm water if the crystals dissolve, there is

no public health risk. Please return the product to the retailer or manufacturer. If the

crystals do not dissolve, there is a public health risk if they are glass, please contact

the Food Safety Team.

# 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 too long. These insects do not carry

disease, but they breed very quickly in warm, humid conditions and spread into

uncontaminated food very quickly. They are not a public health risk.

**Recommendation:**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 immediately afterwards, empty the vacuum cleaner into an

outside waste bin. Store new dried goods in airtight containers and ensure good

ventilation in 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, etcetera and because of

this you may see them in your kitchen cupboards too. They are harmless insects

about 1-2 mm 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.

**Recommendation:**

• All affected food should be removed and thrown away in a bin outside.

• Check all remaining food including the 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 and 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.

There is no public health risk.

# Bakery goods

**Bakery char**

Bread and cakes may contain irregular shaped bits of overcooked dough which has

flaked off bakery tins. Occasionally some flakes or drops may become incorporated

with the dough and are mistaken for rodent droppings which are black and torpedo

shaped whilst bakery char is greyish and uneven in shape.

**Recommendation:**This is not a public health risk and you should contact the

manufacturer / retailer to discuss.

**Carbonised grease**

The machinery used to produce bread and cakes is lubricated with a non-toxic

vegetable oil. Occasionally some may become incorporated into areas where the

dough is handled giving areas the product a grey/greasy appearance and you may

suspect there is dirt or oil in the food.

**Recommendation:**You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as this is not a

public health risk.

# 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.

**Recommendation:**You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as 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 seek legal advice from a solicitor if

necessary.

**Note:**It is very rare for prohibited parts of an animal e.g., genitals, eyes, eyelids,

etcetera, or non-food animals e.g. cats and dogs to be used for human food. Meat

such as chicken and lamb are readily available and relatively inexpensive, it is not

economic for food businesses to make use of prohibited parts of food animals or

non-food species.

# Chicken

**Red leg**

A natural pigment held within the bone being released after cooking and taking on

the appearance of meat not being correctly cooked causes red leg in cooked

chicken. The chicken will be thoroughly cooked but the temperature is not high

enough to denature the pigment.

**Recommendation:**Ensure the chicken is thoroughly cooked and 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, which is

retained on cooking. The colour is not noticed until the bird is carved after cooking.

**Recommendation:**It is unsightly but there is no public health risk. Contact the

retailer or manufacturer.

# Cooked and cured meat and poultry

**Ham**

Ham cooked in a Panini is discoloured after cooking. There are three possible

reasons for this:

1. The “cure” (nitrite level) was not as high as it could have been; and/or

2. The ripening flora of the cheese (if also in the Panini) can produce very small

quantities of hydrogen peroxide, which when combined with the ham, can cause

discolouration.

3. The ham used is out of date.

**Recommendation:**Points 1 and 2 are issues of quality, however as the ham used

could be out of date an investigation would be required. Please contact the Food

Safety Team.

# Wine

**Crystals**

Tartrate Crystals; also known as "wine diamonds" are a natural product of the wine,

and form when the wine gets too cold. Simply sift the crystals out of the wine. The

crystals are not harmful in any way.

**Recommendation:**If you believe it is not tartrate crystals in your wine, but glass

contamination, please contact the Food Safety Team.

**Corked Wine**

Cork is a natural product, which is an ideal closure for wine, but occasionally the cork

could be diseased and affect the taste of the wine. This disease is not harmful and is

called “Trichlorinanisole” (TCA). It is extremely difficult to detect during manufacture

and unfortunately, also evades detection during the inspection procedures suppliers

of the wine carry out before the wine is bottled. Unfortunately, TCA which is found

naturally in cork, can be detected by the human nose at just one part per million, so

when it is present you know about it.

**Recommendation:**You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as this is not a

public health risk.

# Durability dates – best before / use by dates

**'Use by date'**

'Use by' means exactly that. 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, food should not

be sold or used after this date as there is a public health risk. You will usually find a

‘use by' date on food that goes off quickly such as, chilled cooked and cured meats,

milk, soft cheese, ready-prepared salads and smoked fish.

It's also important to follow any storage instructions given on food labels, otherwise

the food might not last until the 'use by' date. Usually food with a 'use by' date needs

to be kept in the fridge.

Some food labels also give instructions such as 'eat within a **‘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.

Make sure that the food is always stored in the fridge after it is opened.

'Display until' and 'sell by' dates are instructions for shop staff to tell them when they

should take a product off the shelves.

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

date.

**Recommendation:**If you have a complaint about food being sold past its use by

date. This is a public health risk; please contact the Food Safety Team.

**Best before dates**

Best before dates are usually used on foods that last longer, such as frozen, dried or

canned foods. It should be safe to eat food after the best before date, but the food

will no longer be at its best. After this date, the food might begin to lose its flavour

and texture but there is no public health risk.

However, if you eat eggs after their best before date, you will need to make sure you

cook both the yolk and the white thoroughly and they must be used within 2 days of

their best before date.

It is not an offence for food businesses to sell food that has passed its best before

date. However, it is an offence if a food business sells or uses food past its best

before date if the food is mouldy, affected by insects, beginning to spoil, or its

condition is physically deteriorating and finally if the food meets the legal description

of not being of the nature, substance or quality.

**Recommendation:**If you have a complaint about food being not of the nature,

substance or quality, this may be a public health risk. Please contact the Food Safety

Team. In some circumstances these complaints are dealt with by Norfolk Trading

Standards, Norfolk County Council and we will advise you accordingly.

**Other dates**

You may see "Sell By" or "Display Until" on some packs. These are not legally

required dates and are meant to be instructions for in-store staff. 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.

# Labelling and allergen labelling requirements

The fundamental rule of the labelling of foodstuffs is that consumers should not be

misled. Detailed labelling of a product educates consumers as to the exact nature

and characteristics of the foodstuff and enables them to make a more informed

choice.

Food businesses have a responsibility to know which allergenic ingredients are

present in the foods they sell. There are 14 major allergens which need to be

declared when used as ingredients. The law means that businesses are no longer

able to say they don’t know what allergens are in the food they serve or produce and

they are not allowed to say that all the foods could contain an allergen.

The legislation regarding the information provided to customers regarding the

allergens present in food is jointly enforced by the Food Safety Team and Norfolk

Trading Standards. If customers have serious concerns or evidence that a food

business is either not able to provide this information or is selling food containing

allergens after a specific customer enquiry please contact either the Food Safety

Team or Norfolk Trading Standards for further advice.

**Recommendation:**Further information about food labelling can be found on the

Food Standards Agency website. [www.food.gov.uk](https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&prev=_t&sl=auto&tl=en&u=http://www.food.gov.uk/)

**Allergen labelling:**For information about the allergen labelling requirements please

visit the Food Standards Agency website: [www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-](https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&prev=_t&sl=auto&tl=en&u=http://www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label)

[intolerance/label](https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&prev=_t&sl=auto&tl=en&u=http://www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label)