

# Kitchen put to the test

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Restaurants must uphold the highest standards of hygiene but how would a residential **kitchen** fare? Emily Dunn allows the inspectors to raid her home.

As would be expected of a NSW Food Authority employee, Peter Sutherland is a clean and tidy-looking man. His uniform is neatly pressed and his spectacles are sparkling. His unassuming appearance would easily go unnoticed in a busy restaurant.

In my **kitchen**, however, he is difficult to ignore.

"My job is not necessarily just about inspecting the **kitchen**, it is about observing people's behaviour," Sutherland says, his eyes slowly scanning the sink of dirty dishes, stove top and fridge. "It is amazing how quickly people forget an officer is in the **kitchen**."

Sutherland prefers the title of food safety officer to health inspector to describe the work of council officers who visit restaurants. The NSW Food Authority gathers the results from these inspections and publishes them in an annual report card.

According to the latest report card in October, restaurant standards are improving. But hundreds still end up on the NSW Food Authority name-and-shame list, updated weekly.

It is questionable whether most home **kitchens** in Sydney would live up to the same standards. My **kitchen**, for one, would be a shoo-in to be named and shamed.

"When we look at a restaurant, we start in the **kitchen** out the back," Sutherland says. "We look at how the food is brought in and where it is stored. We check the temperature of the coolrooms and look for signs of pests. But we also look at activity in the **kitchen**."

The most frequent visitors to my **kitchen** include my grubby son and our even grubbier dog. I am fairly sure the **kitchen** is the dog's favourite room in the house.

Most chefs don't have to worry about live animals in the **kitchen**, save the occasional lobster, but were I a commercial restaurant, a dog sharing food-preparation areas would be grounds for a hefty fine and a public shaming.

Luckily for me, Sutherland is also a dog owner and says not all the 42 points of order on the assessment report are necessary for a domestic **kitchen**.

But when it comes to food hygiene and safety in commercial and domestic **kitchens**, there is common ground. Pests such as cockroaches and rodents can be prevented by keeping food-preparation areas dry and checking warm areas such as behind fridges and microwaves.

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The spread of infectious bacteria is the most important determinant in the number of Australians - 5.4 million, according to the authority - who get food poisoning each year. Of the complaints the authority received about commercial **kitchens** for its October report, 40 per cent related to hygiene and handling issues. According to Sutherland, this is just as relevant for the home **kitchen**.

"It is amazing how many people don't wash their hands - 35 per cent admit to only remembering to wash their hands after they have started cooking," he says.

The tea towel is another of Sutherland's bugbears. Like chopping boards - which should be scrubbed between uses and regularly given a "good dose of sunlight" - tea towels are a common source of cross-contamination. "You use the tea towel to dry the dishes, wipe the bench, maybe wipe the floor and then you might wipe your child's nose," he says.

Guilty, guilty, guilty, your honour.

The sink is another refuge for bacteria and should be cleaned daily but the fridge is the real danger zone.

Mine is a safe temperature of about 5 degrees but the food inside is another matter. I get my eggs from my mother-in-law's farm. Unlike supermarket eggs, they often have feathers and other unmentionables attached.

"Even in a carton, this can introduce bacteria to your fridge," Sutherland says. "When you are cracking them, you also transfer the dirt from your hands into the dish."

I also have meat defrosting on the sink, another no-no. The outside of the meat can come to room temperature while the inside is still frozen, allowing some pathogens to produce toxins.

Another source of this problem is cooked rice, which should not be kept in the fridge for longer than one day.

"When you cook the meat, it kills the bacteria but not the toxins and that is what makes you sick," Sutherland says.

The same goes for cooked food intended as leftovers, such as meat or rice. At 20 degrees, bacteria will double every 20 minutes. One salmonella bug in a piece of cooked meat ends up as 1 million after 12 hours at room temperature.

"Put it in the fridge as soon as it is warm and use it within two days," Sutherland says.

If food is not eaten by its use-by date, as opposed to best-before date (see breakout above), Sutherland suggests throwing it out. Or, in my case, giving it to the dog.

Healthy eating starts with safety

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With two children aged under three, Rebecca Ruis admits keeping the **kitchen** clean is a daily battle. Food safety officer Peter Sutherland however, gives her top marks. There are no signs of pests and the sink is spotless.

"The cleaner comes on Mondays, so it is actually much cleaner than it normally looks," she confesses.

Sutherland opens the pantry, displaying neat rows of tinned food and dry goods in airtight plastic containers and checks the dates on the packages and examines the tinned products for dents. "If they are dented, the product can start to aerate," Sutherland says. "The barrier is broken and the shelf life is shorter, you don't really know by how much."

Sutherland then checks the fridge. "This is probably a little too high, about nine degrees," he says. "If the fridge is at nine degrees the door can be 10 degrees, which can be a problem if that is where you are storing your milk. Leaving the door open for a minute can double the temperature."

Features in a home **kitchen** that would raise alarm bells with a food safety officer.

1. Open fridge

Loses heat quickly. Minimise opening and ensure it stays below 5 degrees.

2. Dirty dishes, trays in sink

They should be washed immediately.

3. Washing-up brush, sponge

They should be kept dry and replaced regularly. Replace sponge weekly.

4. Soap

It should always be available at the sink.

5. Tea towel

Replace after each meal. Wash and dry, preferably in daylight.

6. Frozen meat

Always defrost in fridge.

7. Carton of eggs

Sourced from a farm, with feathers attached, they should be washed.

8. Spilt sugar on workbench

Attracts pests and should be always wiped clean immediately.

9. Bench joints

Should be sealed to avoid pests.

10. Exhaust fan (not pictured)

Check regularly for pests. This is one of the first things a restaurant food inspector examines.

Follow the rules at home

Many rules applicable to restaurants and cafes apply equally to home **kitchens**.

Here are some key guidelines from the NSW Food Authority. Commercial **kitchens** that fail to abide by these recommendations risk a fine.

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## KEEPING YOUR KITCHEN SAFE

1. Wash hands thoroughly before starting to prepare, or eat, food.
  2. Avoid cross-contamination from utensils, chopping boards and tea towels by washing between uses and allowing to dry, preferably in sunlight. A tea towel should be changed after every meal.
  3. Temperature control: keep the fridge below 5 degrees. The danger zone for bacteria is 6 to 60 degrees. Put any food that needs to be kept cold in the fridge immediately. This includes cooked food that's still hot. Don't eat food that should be in the fridge if it's been left out for two hours or more. Defrost and marinate foods especially meats in the fridge. Cook and reheat foods until until they're steaming hot. Cook meats such as mince, sausages, chicken and pork thoroughly.
  4. Correct storage of food products: Food should be covered. Cooked foods should be stored above raw foods in the fridge. Leftovers should be refrigerated while still warm and kept for no more than two days.
  5. Don't keep foods past their use-by dates.
- \* Fridge temperature is so critical to safety, the NSW Food Authority gives free thermometers. Phone 1300 552 406.

## KEEPING YOUR KITCHEN CLEAN

1. Keep benches dry and free of food scraps. Bacteria love warm, moist environments. Clean with an anti-bacterial spray or disinfectant if the benches have come in contact with foods such as raw meat.
2. Keep the sink clean and dry, including brushes. Replace sponges every week.
3. Avoid pests by keeping **kitchen** areas well sealed. This includes gaps between the wall, benches and floors. Cockroaches love warm areas around the oven, dishwasher, microwave and fridge so these should be checked for signs of infestation.
4. Clean the dishwasher with a rinse cycle once a fortnight and remove food scraps. Clean the fridge once a month.
5. Keep garbage contained.

## BEST READ THIS BEFORE THROWING IT OUT

British government ministers are targeting "best before" labels, which they blame for 8.3 million tonnes of food landing in the bin each year, despite being fine to eat. Australians throw away \$5 billion worth of food each year but there are no plans to introduce similar changes to labelling laws here.

While food past its use-by date should not be consumed, food past its best-before date poses a quality not a safety issue and can be eaten, according to the Australian Food Safety Information Council. Food past its best-before date can also legally be sold.