

# Serving Burgers that are Safe for the Consumer

Everybody running a food business has the same legal obligation – to only sell or serve food that is safe to eat. When cooking and serving minced meat burgers, cook them thoroughly to guarantee any harmful bacteria present are destroyed.

## Eliminating or reducing risk to an acceptable level

In order to ensure the safety of food, all food business operators must put procedures in place to identify the risks in food and eliminate those risks or reduce them to an acceptable level.

Risk identification in the case of raw minced meat is straightforward. The meat can be contaminated with bacteria which are harmful to health if consumed. A study carried out in Ireland showed that some minced beef burgers and minced beef samples from retail and catering establishments were contaminated with verocytotoxigenic *E. coli* (VTEC) and *Salmonella*. VTEC was detected in 2.5% of samples and *Salmonella* in 0.1% of samples<sup>1</sup>.

VTEC and *Salmonella* can cause serious illness, particularly in people vulnerable to infection such as young children, older people, pregnant women and people undergoing treatments or with medical conditions that impair their immune system. Microbial contamination usually occurs on the exposed surface of whole cuts of meat while the internal muscle is largely sterile. When meat is minced, microorganisms that are on the surface of the meat become mixed throughout. This is why minced meat and burgers should be cooked thoroughly, but steaks or whole joints of beef or lamb may be cooked rare.

To ensure that minced meat burgers are safe to eat, they should be cooked to a core temperature of 75°C (or an equivalent time temperature combination, e.g. 70°C for 2 minutes). In technical terms, this is the critical control point (CCP). To ensure that the cooking method achieves this temperature, the core of the burger should be regularly checked using a probe thermometer as colour is not a reliable indicator of temperature.



<sup>1</sup> FSAI (2013) Study on Microbiological Safety of Raw Minced Beef and Beef Burgers on Retail Sale in Ireland  
[www.fsai.ie](http://www.fsai.ie)

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Food business operators considering serving undercooked burgers or mince (medium or rare) must be able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the Environmental Health Service that they have scientifically validated control procedures in place to eliminate the risks to health posed by VTEC, *Salmonella* and other pathogens present in raw meat.

## Purchasing minced meat and burgers

Most manufacturers intend the minced meat or minced meat burgers they produce to be cooked before eating. If so, they are legally required to label the meat<sup>2</sup> (on-pack or in accompanying documentation) with the instruction that it should be cooked thoroughly before eating. The instructions for use set by the manufacturer cannot be ignored and must be followed.

## Customer requests for undercooked burgers and disclaimer notices on menus

Food law is in place to protect consumers' health and consumers' interests. Placing a disclaimer notice on a menu which advises of the dangers of consuming undercooked minced meat and minced meat burgers does not provide the food business operator with an exemption from food law or its requirement to serve only safe food.

Similarly, a customer request for undercooked rare or medium burgers does not provide the food business operator with an exemption from the requirement to only serve safe food.

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<sup>2</sup> The additional labelling requirements in Regulation (EC) No 2073/2005 do not apply to burgers made from poultry meat.