

## 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 us using the contact details on our website at [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)

You can complain to us about food you have purchased, hygiene standards in a food premises and food poisoning. 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 West Suffolk.

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## **1. Canned foods**

### **1.1. 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 sterilized by the canning process. There is no public health risk.

#### **Action**

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

### **1.2. 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.

#### **Action**

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 also seek legal advice from a solicitor if necessary.

### **1.3. 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 sterilized by the canning process so they are not a health risk. Every effort is made to control these pests while crops are growing. You may still 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 risk to health.

#### **Action**

Although unpleasant to find a larvae/grub in food there is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer.

### **1.4. White spots in canned grapefruit**

Sometimes, canned grapefruit will be covered in white specks that look like mould. Also the liquid in the can 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 the fruit contains and when canned and excess Naringin can crystallize out. The product is safe to eat and there is no health risk.

#### **Action**

There is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer.

### **1.5. Mould on canned food**

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**

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.

#### **1.6. 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.

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.

### **Action**

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

## **2. Fish**

### **2.1. 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.

### **Action**

There is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer or retailer.

### **2.2. Cod worms**

White fish such as cod or haddock may contain small, round brownish- yellow worms found in the flesh. These worms scientifically called *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 but 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 tons of fish landed each year.

#### **Action**

There is no public health risk. You should contact the retailer or supplier.

### **2.3 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. As long as the manufacturer has taken all reasonable steps to remove the bones, then we cannot take formal action.

#### **Action**

There is no public health risk. You should contact the retailer, supplier or manufacturer.

#### **Sea lice**

Sea lice means 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**

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

## **3. Vegetables and fruit**

### **3.1. Stones, soil and 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.

#### **Action**

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

### **3.2. 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.

#### **Action**

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

### **3.3. 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.

#### **Action**

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.

### **3.4. 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. 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.

#### **Action**

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

### **3.5. Mushroom fibres/hair**

Sometimes we get complaints about hairs in food such as pizza but the 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 on 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. Contact the retailer or manufacturer.

### **3.6. 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.

### **3.7. 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. We recommend that you check the produce before purchase and return to the retailer.

### **3.8. Larvae in frozen vegetables**

The same information for larvae in canned foods above applies to frozen foods. These are not harmful.

#### **Action**

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

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

- 1)** 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.

#### **Action**

There is no public health risk. Contact the manufacturer or retailer.

- 2)** There may also be other causes of mould growth 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.

#### **Action**

There is no public health risk. Contact the manufacturer or retailer.

- 3)** 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.

### **Action**

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 us using the contact details on our website: [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk) as there may be a public health risk.

## **4. Chocolate and confectionery**

### **4.1. 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.

### **Action**

There is no public health risk. You should return the product to the retailer or manufacturer.

### **4.2. 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. 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, contact us via the contact details on our website: [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)

## **5. Dried foods**

### **5.1. 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.

### **Action**

There is no 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 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.

### **5.2. Psocids - small insects in flours**

Psocids are very, very small grey or brown insects which are only very occasionally found in dry foods like flour, milk powder, sugar, semolina and similar foods 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. They are not a public health risk.

### **Action**

- 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 sterilizing 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.

If you have only just purchased the product from a shop and you believe the problem came from there, please contact the food safety team using the contact details on our website: [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)

## **6. Bakery goods**

### **6.1. 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.

### **Action**

There is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer or retailer.

### **6.2. Carbonised grease**

The machinery used to produce bread and cakes is 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**

There is no public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer or retailer.

## **7. Meat and poultry**

### **7.1. 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**

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 also seek legal advice from a solicitor if necessary.

### **Note**

It is very rare for prohibited parts of an animal eg genitals, eyes, eyelids, etc. or non-food animals eg 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.

## **8. Chicken**

### **8.1. 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.

### **Action**

Ensure the chicken is thoroughly cooked and the juices are running clear. This is not a public health risk.

### **8.2. 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.

### **Action**

It is unsightly but there is no public health risk. Contact the retailer or manufacturer.

## **9. Cooked and cured meat and poultry**

### **9.1. 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
- 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.

### **Action**

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 us using our using the contact details on our website: [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)

## **10. Wine**

### **10.1. Crystals**

Tartrate Crystals are also known as "wine diamonds" and are a natural product of the wine. They form when the wine gets too cold. Simply sift the crystals out of the wine. The crystals are not harmful in any way.

## Action

If you believe it is not tartrate crystals in your wine but glass contamination contact us using the contact details on our website: [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)

### 10.2. 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 Trichloroanisole (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.

## Action

This is not a public health risk. You should contact the manufacturer or retailer.

## 11. Durability dates

### 11.1. Use by date is about food safety

Use by date is about safety and the most important date to remember. Foods can be eaten (and most can be frozen) up until the use by date, but not after. You will see use by dates on food that goes off quickly, such as meat products or ready-prepared salads. For the use by to be a valid guide, you must carefully follow storage instructions.

**After the use by date, don't eat it, cook it or freeze it. The food could be unsafe to eat or drink, even if it is stored correctly and looks and smells fine.**

## Action

If food is being sold past its **use by** date this is a public health risk. Contact us using the contact details on our website: [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)

### 11.2. Best before date is about quality

Best before date is about quality and not safety. The food will be safe to eat after this date but may not be at its best. Its flavour and texture might not be as good. There is no public health risk. The best before dates appear on a wide range of frozen, dried, tinned and other foods. The best before date will only be accurate if the food is stored according to the instructions on the label.

However, if you eat eggs after their minimum durability 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 minimum durability date.

It is not an offence for food businesses to sell food that has passed its minimum durability date. However it might be an offence if a food business sells or uses food past its best before date if the food is also mouldy, affected by insects, beginning to spoil, or its condition is physically deteriorating.

## Action

If food is also mouldy, affected by insects, beginning to spoil, or its condition is physically deteriorating this is a public health risk. Contact us using the contact details on our website: [www.westsuffolk.gov.uk](http://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk)

## 12. Allergen information and labelling

### 12.1. Allergen information

The law requires that information be provided about 14 allergens in food. These allergens are:

- celery
- cereals that contain gluten (including wheat, rye, barley and oats)
- crustaceans (including prawns, crabs and lobsters)
- eggs
- fish
- lupin (lupins are common garden plants, and the seeds from some varieties are sometimes used to make flour)
- milk
- molluscs (including mussels and oysters)
- mustard
- tree nuts – such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts
- peanuts
- sesame seeds
- soybeans
- sulphur dioxide and sulphites (preservatives that are used in some foods and drinks)

### Information to be provided

- These allergens must be emphasised on the label, if they are used as ingredients in a pre-packaged food.
- Information about allergenic ingredients must be located in a single place, i.e. the ingredients list on prepacked food. This means that the voluntary use of the previous types of allergy boxes such as: 'Contains nuts' that provide a short cut to allergen ingredients information also given in the ingredients list, is no longer allowed. The use of voluntary precautionary allergen labelling such as 'may contain', to indicate the risk of unintentional presence of allergens in a food, is permitted.
- Allergen information should be provided if these allergens are used as ingredients in loose foods (that can be bought without packaging) for example in supermarkets, delis, cafes and restaurants.

### Action

For information about the allergen information requirements please visit the Food Standards Agency website: [www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label](http://www.food.gov.uk/science/allergy-intolerance/label)  
Suffolk County Council's Trading Standards lead on the law dealing with allergen information. Call the Citizens Advice consumer helpline and tell them you want to report a trader to Trading Standards. The consumer helpline will assess your problem and pass it on to Trading Standards if it's appropriate.

- Telephone: 03454 04 05 06; open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm. Closed on bank holidays
- Textphone: 18001 03454 04 05 06
- Online form <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/get-more-help/if-you-need-more-help-about-a-consumer-issue/>

## **12.2. Labelling**

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.

### **Action**

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

Suffolk County Council's Trading Standards deal with food labelling. Call the Citizens Advice consumer helpline and tell them you want to report a trader to Trading Standards. The consumer helpline will assess your problem and pass it on to Trading Standards if it's appropriate.

- Telephone: 03454 04 05 06; open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm. Closed on bank holidays
- Textphone: 18001 03454 04 05 06
- Online form <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/get-more-help/if-you-need-more-help-about-a-consumer-issue/>

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## **Acknowledgments**

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