



## Examples of 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. Our thanks go to the Royal Borough of Greenwich for this document.

If you are unable to resolve the problem that you have by reading our self-help guide please contact us via [foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk) You can complain to us about food you have purchased, hygiene standards in a food premises and symptoms of food poisoning.

We can only investigate complaints about hygiene standards in food businesses and food purchased from businesses that are based in East Cambridgeshire District Council. Purchases outside the district will be forwarded to the relevant Council.

## INDEX - Common Food Complaints

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## **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 should be no public health risk.

**Action:** Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there should be 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.

**Action:** There should be 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.

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

Small grubs may be 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 should be no public health risk.

**Action:** 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 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, this excess Naringin crystallizes out. The product is safe to eat and there should be no health risk.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer, there should be no public health risk.

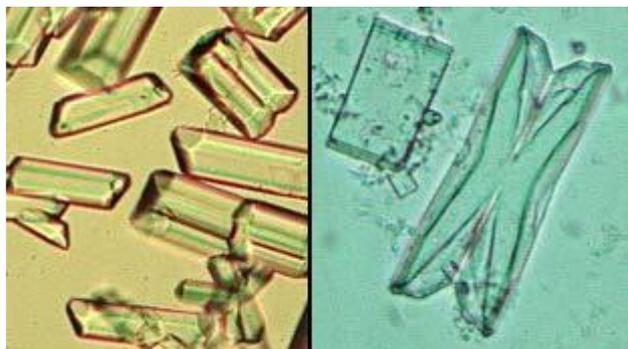
## Mould



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. Simply knocking or dropping a can may cause mould growth. Affected foods should not be consumed.

**Action:** You would not eat this food and it is best to return it to the retailer or manufacturer. There should be no public health risk.

## Glass-like crystals in canned fish - Struvite



Certain naturally occurring elements 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 into a powder.

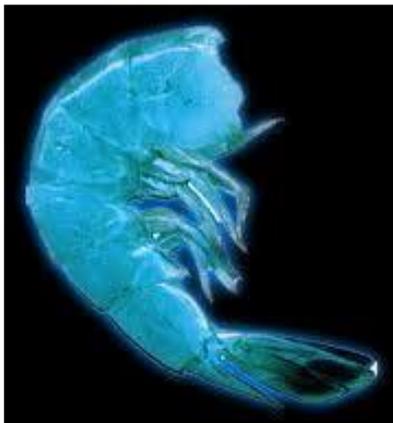
If you look under a magnifying glass the edges are smooth where broken glass will be irregular. (Image from [stoke.gov.uk](http://stoke.gov.uk))

Struvite crystals are soluble in a hot dilution of vinegar or lemon juice and water when gently heated for up to 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 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, so we would advise you to eat the product, but if you are still concerned, please contact the manufacturer.

## Fish

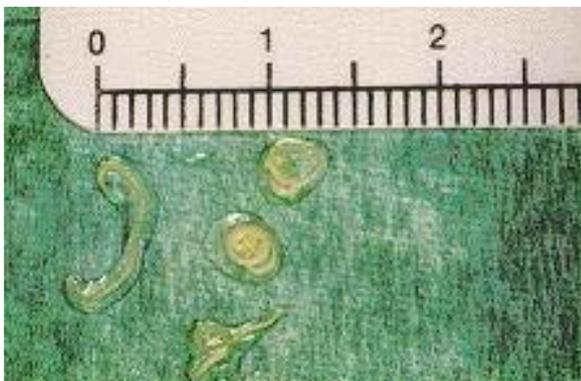
### Glowing fish - Luminous marine bacteria



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. 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. The food is not radioactive!

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer / retailer. There should be no public health risk.

### Cod worm



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

This may be alarming to see but the worms are harmless if consumed. The worms are killed by the cooking and freezing process. 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. The incidence of infected fish is very small in relation to the thousands of tonnes of fish landed each year.

**Action:** You should contact the retailer or supplier there should be 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. As long as the manufacturer has taken all reasonable steps to remove the bones, then we cannot take formal action.

**Action:** You should contact the retailer, supplier or manufacturer.

## **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 should be 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.

**Action:** You should thoroughly wash and rinse all fruit and vegetables thoroughly before eating them. There should be 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 and rinse all salad items thoroughly. There should be 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.

**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 should be no public health risk.

### **Spiders in bananas**

Sometimes, spiders are imported with 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. They are generally harmless, but a large spider can deliver a painful bite.

**Action:** In the unlikely event that you are bitten, seek medical advice.

### **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.

**Action:** Contact the retailer or manufacturer. There should be no public health risk.

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

Cardamom pods are sometimes mistaken as rodent droppings or insects. Cardamom is the common name for a plant species native to India and south-eastern Asia which is used as a spice. The dried fruit (pod) is a small, green to brown coloured capsule containing 8 to 16 brown seeds. The pods can be found whole in cooked, pilau rice.

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

### **Insects in jam**

It is very unpleasant to find insects in jam and preserves. These are usually wasps or fruit flies. These insects are naturally associated with fruit and fruit growing areas. Fruit flies are small and light and some get past the inspection process.

**Action:** We recommend that you check the produce before purchase and return to the retailer. There should be no public health risk.

### **Larvae in frozen vegetables**

Please see the information for insects in canned foods, as the same applies to frozen foods.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer. Although it is unpleasant to find insects in your food there is should be public health risk.

## 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 that are not visible to the naked eye. The tiny holes allow air to enter the carton causing mould to grow in the food or juice. 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:** Contact the manufacturer or retailer. There should be no public health risk.

2. There may also be other causes of mould growth. Please check the following information first - what is the use by/best before date on the product, 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:** Contact the manufacturer or retailer. There should be no public health risk.

3. If the carton 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 this 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 the food officers at [foodandsafety@eastcamb.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcamb.gov.uk) as there may be a public health risk.

## Chocolate / Confectionery

### Bloom

Chocolate may develop pale brown or whitish patches called "bloom" if stored at changing temperatures. It is due to fat separation and it may change the taste of the chocolate. It is not mould and it is not harmful.

**Action:** You should return the product to the retailer or manufacturer. There should be 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. Please return the product to the retailer or manufacturer. If the crystals do not dissolve and they are glass, there is a potential public health risk. Please contact the food safety officers at [foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcambs.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 too long. These insects are not known to carry disease, but they breed very quickly in warm, humid conditions and can spread into other food very quickly.

**Action:** 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 until you are sure that the insects have gone. Ventilate storage areas well.

### 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 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 but like dark 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:**

- All affected food should be removed and thrown away in a bin outside.
- Check all remaining food including 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 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 should be 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 officers at [foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk)

## **Bakery goods**

### **Bakery char**

Bread and cakes may contain irregular shaped bits of overcooked dough which has come from bakery tins. Some flakes or drops may become incorporated with the dough and can be mistaken for rodent droppings. Rodent droppings tend to be very dark brown or black and have tapered or torpedo-shaped ends. Dough remains can have irregular shapes and vary in colour from grey to black.

**Action:** Contact the manufacturer / retailer. This should not be a public health risk.

### **Carbonised grease**

The machinery used to produce bread and cakes is lubricated with a non-toxic and food- safe, vegetable oil. Occasionally, some oil may get into dough leaving grey or greasy patches in the food.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer or retailer. This should not be 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 are normal parts of the animal.

**Action:** You should contact the manufacturer or retailer as this should not be 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 as necessary.

**Note:** It is very rare for prohibited parts of an animal e.g. genitals, eyes, eyelids, or non-food animals to be used for human food.

### **“Off odours”**

You may open the wrapper of meat and notice a bad smell. This may be caused by bone taint, the feed the animal has eaten or be a quality issue that was missed during the inspection of the animal after slaughter. Return the food to the retailer.

## **Chicken**

### **Red leg, chicken looks red and undercooked**

Even though chicken is thoroughly cooked, sometimes, blood-like pink and red deposits can be seen, especially near the bone. This can be caused by marrow leaching from the bones in young poultry or be due to nitrates in the chicken.

You may open the wrapper of a chicken and notice a bad smell. This may be a quality issue that was missed during the inspection of the birds after slaughter. Return the chicken to the retailer.

**Action:** If you are in any doubt about the chicken being thoroughly cooked, either return it to the heat and cook it thoroughly or, if it is cooked chicken that you have bought, do not eat it. Contact the food safety officers at [foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk)

### **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, even after cooking. The colour is not noticed until the bird is carved after cooking.

**Action:** Contact the retailer or manufacturer. It is unsightly but there should be no public health risk.

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

#### **Ham**

Ham cooked in a Panini is discoloured after cooking. Here 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.

**Action:** Points 1 and 2 are issues of quality, however as the ham used could be out of date an investigation would be required. Contact the food safety officers at [foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk)

#### **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.

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

## **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.

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

## **Durability 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 due to a potential 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. As a rule of thumb, keep your fridge at between 0C and 5C.

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

**Action:** If you have a complaint about food being sold past its use by date. Contact the food safety officers at [foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk) This is a potential public health risk.

### **'Minimum durability date' / 'Best before dates'**

'Minimum durability 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 'minimum durability' 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 should be no public health risk.

Food safety law is broken if a food business sells or uses food that is mouldy or spoiled or affected by insects, including if it is in this state and past the shelf life that the manufacturer has given it.

**Action:** Return the food to the retailer or contact the food safety officers at [foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:foodandsafety@eastcambs.gov.uk)

### **Other dates**

You may see "Display Until" on some packs. These are not legally required dates and are meant to be instructions for in-store staff. For whole fresh fruit and vegetables these may be the only dates shown, as they usually do not need to show a date.