

# Safe Food Handling



Have you ever had food poisoning? Actually, it's called "foodborne illness." Perhaps you have, but thought you were sick with the flu.

Some 7 million Americans will suffer from foodborne illness this year. Why? Because at the right temperature, bacteria you can't see, smell, or taste can multiply to the millions in a few short hours. In large numbers, they cause illness.

Food poisoning doesn't have to happen, though. About 85 percent of cases reported could be avoided if people simply handled food properly. So here's what to do.

## *When You Shop*

### **Buy cold food last; get it home fast**

- When you're out, grocery shop last. Take food straight home to the refrigerator. **Never leave food in a hot car!**
- Don't buy anything you won't use before the use-by date.
- Don't buy food in poor condition. Make sure refrigerated food is cold to the touch. Frozen food should be rock-solid. Canned goods should be free of dents, cracks, or bulging lids, which can indicate a serious food poisoning threat.

## *When You Store Food*

### **Keep it safe; refrigerate**

Check the temperature of your refrigerator with an appliance thermometer you can buy at a variety or hardware store. To keep bacteria in check, the refrigerator should run at 40 °F, the freezer unit at 0 °F. Generally, keep your refrigerator as cold as possible without freezing your milk or lettuce.

- Freeze fresh meat, poultry, or fish immediately if you can't use it within a few days.
- Put packages of raw meat, poultry, or fish on a plate before refrigerating so juices won't drip on other food. Raw juices often contain bacteria.

## *When You Prepare Food*

### **Keep everything clean; thaw in refrigerator**

- Wash hands in hot, soapy water before preparing food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and/or handling pets.
- Bacteria can live in kitchen towels, sponges, and cloths. Wash them often. Replace sponges every few weeks.
- Keep raw meat, poultry, and fish and their juices away from other food. For instance, wash your hands, cutting board, and knife in hot, soapy water after cutting up the chicken and before dicing salad ingredients.
- Use plastic cutting boards rather than wooden ones where bacteria can hide in grooves.
- Thaw food in the microwave or refrigerator, NOT on the kitchen counter. The danger? Bacteria can grow in the outer layers of the food before the inside thaws. Marinate in the refrigerator, too.

## *When You're Cooking*

### **Cook foods thoroughly**

It takes thorough cooking to kill harmful bacteria, so you're taking chances when you eat meat, poultry, fish, or eggs that are raw or only partly cooked. Rare and medium-rare steak, hamburger, and roast beef are also undercooked from a safety standpoint.

- Cook red meat to 160 °F. Cook poultry to 180 °F. Use a meat thermometer to check that it's cooked all the way through.
- Salmonella, a bacterium that causes food poisoning, can grow inside fresh, unbroken eggs. Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm, not runny. Scramble eggs to a firm texture; don't use recipes in which eggs remain raw or only partially cooked.
- When you cook ahead, divide large portions of food into small, shallow containers for refrigeration. This ensures safe, rapid cooling.



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### *Safe Microwaving*

A great timesaver, the microwave has one food safety disadvantage—it sometimes leaves cold spots in food. Bacteria can survive in these spots. So...

- Cover food with a lid or plastic wrap so steam can aid thorough cooking. Vent wrap and make sure it doesn't touch the food.
- Stir and rotate your food for even cooking. No turntable? Rotate the dish by hand once or twice during cooking.
- Observe the standing time called for in a recipe or package directions. During the standing time, food finishes cooking.
- Use the oven temperature probe or a meat thermometer to check that a food is done. Insert it at several spots.

### *When You Serve Food*

#### **Never leave it out more than 2 hours**

- Use clean dishes and utensils to serve food, not those used in preparation. Serve grilled food on a clean plate, too, not one that held raw meat, poultry, or fish.
- Never leave perishable food out of the refrigerator more than 2 hours! Bacteria that can cause food poisoning grow quickly at warm temperatures.
- Pack lunches in insulated carriers with cold packs. Caution children never to leave lunches in direct sun or on a warm radiator.
- Carry picnic food in a cooler with a cold pack. When possible, put the cooler in the shade. Keep the lid on as much as you can.
- Party time? Keep cold food on ice or serve it throughout the gathering from platters from the refrigerator. Divide hot party food into smaller serving platters. Keep platters refrigerated until time to warm them for serving.

### *When You Handle Leftovers*

#### **Use small containers for quick cooling**

- Divide large amounts of leftovers into small, shallow containers for quick cooling in the refrigerator. Don't pack the refrigerator; cool air must circulate to keep food safe.
- With poultry or other stuffed meats, remove stuffing and refrigerate it in separate containers.

### *Reheating*

- Bring sauces, soups, and gravies to a boil. Heat other leftovers thoroughly to 165 °F.
- Microwave leftovers using a lid or vented plastic wrap for thorough heating.

### *Kept It Too Long?*

#### **When in doubt, throw it out**

Safe refrigerator and freezer-storage time limits are available in Extension Publication 1787 *A Quick Consumer Guide to Safe Food Handling*. But what about something you totally forgot about and may have kept too long?

- **Danger**—never taste food that looks or smells strange to see if you can still use it. Just discard it.
- Is it moldy? The mold you see is only the tip of the iceberg. The poisons that molds can form are found under the surface of the food. So, while you can sometimes save hard cheese, salamis, firm fruits, and vegetables by cutting the mold out (remove a large area around it) you should discard most moldy food.

### *Is It Food Poisoning?*

If you or a family member develops nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, or cramps, you could have food poisoning. Unfortunately, it's not always easy to tell because, depending on the illness, symptoms can appear anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 weeks after eating bad food; most often, though, people get sick within 4 to 48 hours.

In more serious cases, food poisoning victims may have nervous system problems such as paralysis, double vision, or trouble swallowing or breathing. If symptoms are severe or the victim is very young, old, pregnant, or already ill, call a doctor or go to the hospital right away.

### *When To Report Foodborne Illness*

- You or your physician should report serious cases of foodborne illness to the local health department.
- Report any food poisoning incidents if the food came from a restaurant or commercial outlet.
- Give a detailed but short account of the incident. If the food is a commercial product, have it in hand so you can describe it.
- If you're asked to keep the food refrigerated so officials can examine it later, follow directions carefully.



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