

Top Tips for Food Safety

Just as healthful eating is a priority, keeping food safe to eat also is important for staying healthy. This calls for handling food safely—from shopping and promptly bringing food home from the store, to storing, preparing, serving and transporting foods. Help protect yourself and your family from food-related illnesses with these simple food-safety measures.

Handle Food with Care.

Food safety means preventing the foods you eat from making you sick. Food-borne illnesses are caused by bacteria that may be present on food when purchased or that get into food during preparation, cooking, serving, storage or transporting from one location to another. Bacteria are invisible and can grow on meat, poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy products, as well as in raw or cooked vegetables and fruits.

While everyone is at risk for food-borne illnesses, some people may be at higher risk for getting sick from eating unsafe food. These include pregnant women, infants and young children, older adults and people with weakened immune systems or chronic illnesses. Signs and symptoms of food-borne illnesses range from upset stomach, diarrhea, fever, vomiting, abdominal cramps and dehydration to more severe illness and even death.

Follow these top tips for keeping food safe.

- **Practice safe shopping.**

Take note of the “sell by” or “use by” dates on packages before and after you buy them. While in the store, inspect meat, poultry and fish to be sure packaging is not damaged or torn, and that canned goods are free of dents, bulges and leaks. Select frozen and refrigerated foods, as well as any cooked items from the deli, just before you check out. Check that frozen foods feel solid and refrigerated foods feel cold; get these foods home promptly; then quickly store them in the refrigerator or freezer.

- **Keep it clean, clean, clean.**

Keep hands, utensils and surfaces that come in contact with food clean. Wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food, especially after touching meat, poultry, eggs or seafood, to remove



harmful bacteria. After cutting raw meats, thoroughly wash cutting board, utensils and countertops with hot soapy water. A mixture of 1 teaspoon of unscented liquid chlorine bleach in 1 quart of water can be used to sanitize cutting boards, utensils and countertops. After sanitizing, allow surfaces to air-dry or dry with paper towels.

- **Change dishtowels, sponges and dishcloths regularly.**

Moist towels, sponges and dishcloths are a perfect breeding ground for bacteria. Rinse sponges and dishcloths after each use in hot, soapy water or in a bleach-and-water solution. Allow them to dry out when not in use. Change dishtowels and dishcloths

often and launder them in hot, soapy water; replace sponges.

- **Wash fresh produce before eating.**

Rinse all fresh fruits and vegetables under clean running water. Even if you plan to peel the produce before eating, wash it first. (Note: Don't clean foods with detergent or bleach, as these are not intended for consumption.) A soft produce brush is useful for getting at hard-to-reach crevices in firm-skin produce such as melons or potatoes. Remove soft spots and wilted leaves before eating. All produce that is purchased pre-cut or peeled should be refrigerated.

- **Separate, don't cross-contaminate.**

To prevent bacteria from crossing from one food to another, always keep raw meat, poultry and seafood (and their juices) and eggs separate from ready-to-eat foods. It's wise to use a dedicated cutting board for raw meat products. Never place cooked or ready-to-eat food on a cutting board or plate that held raw meat, poultry, eggs or seafood, unless it has been thoroughly washed between uses in hot, soapy water. Always marinate foods in a covered dish in the refrigerator and discard any leftover marinades that have been used with raw meat, poultry or seafood.

- **Take your food's temperature when cooking.**

An instant-read food thermometer is an essential kitchen tool for determining whether or not cooked food is safe to eat. Relying on cooking time or checking a food's color is not enough. When cooking meat, poultry, fish and egg dishes, checking the temperature with a food thermometer is the only reliable way to make sure the food is cooked thoroughly

to kill harmful bacteria. The following chart shows some recommended safe *minimum* internal temperatures.

Cook:	To a minimum of:
Ground beef	160°F
Ground chicken or turkey	165°F
Beef, veal and lamb steaks, roasts and chops	145°F
Fish	145°F
Pork	160°F
Egg dishes	160°F
Poultry	165°F

- **Stay away from the “danger zone.”**

Harmful bacteria can multiply fast when the temperature of perishable foods stays in the “danger zone,” between 40°F and 140°F. Follow the 2-hour rule: refrigerate or freeze perishable foods and leftovers within two hours and discard any cooked or perishable foods left at room temperature for longer than 2 hours. (Note that when temperatures reach 90°F or higher, this becomes the 1-hour rule.)

- **Keep hot foods HOT and cold foods COLD.**

Cold temperatures keep harmful bacteria from growing on food, while hot temperatures (above 160°F) destroy harmful bacteria. When serving foods buffet-style, be sure hot foods are held at 140°F or higher by using chafing dishes, slow cookers and warming trays. Cold foods should be held at 40°F or lower by nesting dishes in bowls of ice. Alternatively, use small serving dishes. Then, discard leftovers that have been at room temperature for 2 hours, and replenish foods on clean dishes.

- **Thaw frozen foods safely.**

Placing frozen foods in the refrigerator is the best way to promote slow, safe thawing. Just be sure to put items in containers or leak-proof bags so that juices from thawing meat, poultry or fish do not drip onto other foods. For faster thawing, place frozen food in a leak-proof plastic bag and submerge in cold tap water, changing the water every 30 minutes. If using a microwave to thaw meat and poultry, cook immediately after thawing. Do not defrost food at room temperature.

- **Handle leftovers with care.**

Divide cooked leftovers into shallow containers (e.g., slice roasts or divide casseroles into smaller portions), label packages with the current date and put them in the

refrigerator or freezer within 2 hours of cooking to promote rapid, even cooling. When you’re ready to reheat prepared foods or leftovers, bring soups, sauces and gravies to a boil and heat other cooked foods steaming hot (165°F). Eat or freeze cooked leftovers within 3 to 4 days.

- **Think safety when transporting foods.**

When transporting foods to be eaten away from home, such as bag lunches, potato salad for a party or potluck casseroles, wrap foods carefully, keep perishables cold and reheat hot, cooked foods to a safe internal temperature.

- **Keep watch over foods in your refrigerator.**

Many foods have limits for how long they can remain in the refrigerator before spoiling or becoming dangerous to eat, so it’s smart to write the purchase date on packages before refrigerating or freezing them. Clean your refrigerator each week and discard foods that exceed the following recommended storage times. Tip: Use a refrigerator thermometer to be sure the temperature stays at 40°F or below.

Food	Refrigerator storage (40°F)
Eggs, fresh in shell	3 to 5 weeks
Hard-cooked eggs	1 week
Ground meat	1 to 2 days
Fresh steaks, chops, and roasts	3 to 5 days
Fresh poultry	1 to 2 days
Cooked meat and poultry	3 to 4 days
Cooked casseroles with meat or poultry	3 to 4 days
Cooked meat or poultry in gravy or broth	1 to 2 days

For More Food Safety Information

Various US Government Agencies provide a wealth of helpful food safety information. Check out these sources for more detailed tips:

- General food safety information: www.foodsafety.gov
- FDA Food Information and Seafood Hotline: 888-723-3366
- USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline: 888-674-6854