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A Quick Consumer Guide to Safe Food Handling

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Never 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, some can cause foodborne illness.

It doesn't have to happen, though. Some 85 per-cent of cases could be avoided if people just 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 foodborne illness 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 or lower; the freezer unit at 0° F or lower. 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. Use proper freezer packaging.
- Put packages of raw meat, poultry or fish on a plate before refrigerating so their 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 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 and rough surfaces.
- 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 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. Plus, hamburger that is red in the middle, rare and medium-rare steak and roast beef are also undercooked from the safety standpoint.

- Cook red meat to 160° F for greatest safety. Cook poultry to 180° F. Use a meat thermometer to check that it's cooked all the way through.
- To check visually, red meat is done when it's brown or grey inside. Poultry juices run clear. Fish flakes with a fork.
- Salmonella, a bacteria that causes food poisoning, can grow inside fresh, unbroken eggs. So 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.

COOKING TEMPERATURE	
Product	° Fahrenheit
Eggs & Egg Dishes	
Eggs	Cook until yolk & white are firm
Egg dishes	160
Ground Meat & Meat Mixtures	
Turkey, chicken	170
Veal, beef, lamb, pork	160
Fresh beef	
Rare (some bacterial risk)	140
Medium	160
Well Done	170
Fresh Veal	
Medium	160
Well Done	170
Fresh Lamb	
Medium	160
Well Done	170

- When you cook ahead, divide large portions of food into small, shallow containers for refrigeration. This ensures safe, rapid cooling.

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 the 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 microwave oven temperature probe or a meat thermometer to check that food is done. Insert it at several spots.

Fresh Pork	
Medium	160
Well Done	170
Poultry	
Chicken, whole	180
Turkey, whole	180
Poultry breasts, roasts	170
Poultry thighs, wings	Cook until juices run clear
Stuffing (cooked alone or in bird)	165
Duck & Goose	180
Ham	
Fresh (raw)	160
Pre-cooked (to reheat)	140

When You Serve Food — Never leave it out over two hours

- Use clean dishes and utensils to serve food, never 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 over two hours!* Bacteria that can cause food poisoning grow quickly at warm temperatures.
- Pack lunches in insulated carriers with a cold pack. 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 party food on ice or serve it throughout the party from containers kept in the refrigerator.

Likewise, divide hot party food into smaller serving platters. Keep platters refrigerated until time to warm them up 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 gravy 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 given for many common foods in the "Cold Storage" table. 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 molds can form are found under the surface of the food. So, while you can sometimes save hard cheese and salamis and firm fruits and vegetables by cutting the mold out-remove a large area around it, most moldy food should be discarded.

Power's Out

If power will be coming back on fairly soon, you can make the food last longer by keeping the refrigerator/freezer door shut as much as possible.

Your freezer

Without power, a full upright or chest freezer will keep everything frozen for about 2 days. A half-full freezer will keep food frozen 1 day.

If power will be off for an extended period, take food to friends' freezers, locate a commercial freezer or use dry ice. Ventilate the room if dry ice is used.

Your refrigerator-freezer combination

Without power, the refrigerator section will keep food cool 4-6 hours depending on the kitchen temperature.

A full, well-functioning freezer unit should keep food frozen for 2 days. A half-full freezer unit should keep things frozen about 1 day.

Block ice can keep food on the refrigerator shelves cooler. Be sure to place the ice in a container to catch the melted water. Dry ice can be added to the freezer unit. You can't touch dry ice and you shouldn't breathe the fumes, so follow handling directions carefully.

Thawed food?

Food still containing ice crystals or that feels refrigerator-cold can be refrozen.

Discard any thawed food that has risen to room temperature and remained there two hours or more. Immediately discard anything with a strange color or odor.

Is it Food Poisoning?

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

In more serious cases, food poisoning victims may have nervous system problems like 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 involved 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.

You may be asked to keep the food refrigerated so officials can examine it later. If so, follow their directions carefully.

COLD STORAGE

These SHORT but safe time limits will help keep refrigerated food from spoiling or becoming dangerous to eat. These time limits will keep frozen food at top quality.

Product	Refrigerator (40° F)	Freezer (0°)
Eggs		
Fresh, in shell	3 weeks	Don't freeze
Raw yolks, whites	2-4 days	1 year
Hardcooked	1 week	Don't freeze well
Liquid pasteurized eggs or egg substitutes, opened	3 days	Don't freeze
unopened	10 days	1 year
Mayonnaise, commercial		
Refrigerate after opening	2 months	Don't freeze

TV Dinners, Frozen Casseroles		
Keep frozen until ready to serve		3-4 months
Deli & Vacuum-Packed Products		
Store-prepared (or home-made) egg, chicken, tuna, ham, macaroni salads	3-5 days	These products don't freeze well.
Pre-stuffed pork & lamb chops, chicken breasts stuffed with dressing	1 days	
Store-cooked convenience meals	1-2 days	
Commercial brand vacuum-packed dinners with USDA seal	2 weeks, unopened	
Soups & Stews		
Vegetable or meat-added	3-4 days	2-3 months
Hamburger, Ground & Stew Meats		
Hamburger & stew meats	1-2 days	3-4 months
Ground turkey, veal, pork, lamb & mixtures of them	1-2 days	3-4 months
Hotdogs & Lunch Meats		
Hotdogs, opened package	1 week	In freezer wrap, 1-2 months
unopened package	2 weeks	
Lunch meats, opened	3-5 days	
unopened	2 weeks	
Bacon & Sausage		
Bacon	7 days	1 month
Sausage, raw from pork, beef, turkey	1-2 days	1-2 months
Smoked breakfast links, patties	7 days	1-2 months
Hard sausage-pepperoni, jerky sticks	2-3 weeks	1-2 months
Ham, Corned Beef		
Corned beef (In pouch with pickling juices)	5-6 days	Drained, wrapped 1 month
Ham, canned (Label says keep refrigerated)	6-9 mos	Don't freeze
Ham, fully cooked-whole	7 days	1-2 months
Ham, fully cooked-half	3-5 days	1-2 months
Ham, fully cooked-slices	3-4 days	1-2 months
Fresh Meat		

Steaks, beef	3-5 days	6-12 months
Chops, pork	3-5 days	4-6 months
Chops, lamb	3-5 days	6-9 months
Roasts, beef	3-5 days	6-12 months
Roasts, lamb	3-5 days	6-9 months
Roasts, pork & veal	3-5 days	4-6 months
Variety meats - tongue, brain, kidneys, liver, heart, chitterlings	1-2 days	3-4 months
Meat Leftovers		
Cooked meat and meat dishes	3-4 days	2-3 months
Gravy and meat broth	1-2 days	2-3 months
Fresh Poultry		
Chicken or turkey, whole	1-2 days	1 year
Chicken or turkey pieces	1-2 days	9 months
Giblets	1-2 days	3-4 months
Cooked Poultry, Leftover		
Fried chicken	3-4 days	4 months
Cooked poultry dishes	3-4 days	4-6 months
Pieces, plain	3-4 days	4 months
Pieces, covered with broth, gravy	1-2 days	6 months
Chicken nuggets, patties	1-2 days	1-3 months

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