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Food Safety

Food safety means knowing how to avoid the spread of bacteria when you're buying, preparing, and storing food. Check out how to handle food safely to prevent foodborne illnesses.

Why Food Safety Matters

Food that hasn't been prepared safely may contain bacteria like E. coli. Unsafe food can also spread foodborne illnesses like  salmonellosissalmonellosis and *Campylobacter* (pronounced: kam-pye-low-BAK-tur) infection.

The good news is that you can keep on top of bacteria and foodborne illness by playing it safe when buying, preparing, and storing food.

Start at the Supermarket

You have your shopping list in one hand and that shopping cart with the bad wheel in the other. But where should you start and how do you know which foods are safe? Take a peek at these tips:

- Make sure you put refrigerated foods in your cart last. For example, meat, fish, eggs, and milk should hit your cart after cereals, produce, and chips.
- When buying packaged meat, poultry (chicken or turkey), or fish, check the expiration date on the label (the date may be printed on the front, side, or bottom, depending on the food). **Don't** buy a food if it has expired or if it will expire before you plan to use it.
- Don't buy or use fish or meat that has a strong or strange odor. Follow your nose and eyes — even if the expiration date is OK, pass on any fresh food that has a strange smell or that looks unusual.
- Place meats in plastic bags so that any juices do not leak onto other foods in your cart.
- Separate any raw meat, fish, or poultry from vegetables, fruit, and other foods you'll eat raw.
- Check eggs before buying them. Make sure that none of the eggs are cracked and that they are all clean. Eggs should be grade A or AA.

Don't slow down your cart for these bad-news foods:

- fruit with broken skin (bacteria can enter through the skin and contaminate the fruit)
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- unpasteurized milk, ciders, or juices (they can contain harmful bacteria)
- pre-stuffed fresh turkeys or chickens

In the Kitchen

After a trip to the market, the first things you should put away are those that belong in the refrigerator and freezer. Keep eggs in the original carton on a shelf in the fridge (most refrigerator doors don't keep eggs cold enough).

Ready to cook but not sure how quickly things should be used, how long they should cook, or what should be washed? Here are some important guidelines:

- Most raw meat, poultry, or fish should be cooked or frozen within 2 days. Steaks, chops, and roasts can stay in the refrigerator 3-5 days.
- Unopened packages of hot dogs and deli meats can be kept in the refrigerator for 2 weeks. Opened packages of hot dogs should be eaten within 1 week and deli meats within 3-5 days.
- Thaw frozen meat, poultry, and fish in the refrigerator or microwave, never at room temperature.
- For best results, use a food thermometer when cooking meat and poultry.
- Cook thawed meat, poultry, and fish immediately; don't let it hang around for hours.
- **Never wash raw chicken.** Washing raw meat and poultry can spread germs around the kitchen. Germs are killed during cooking when chicken is cooked to an internal temperature of 165°F (74°C). So washing doesn't help.
- Cook roasts, steaks, chops, and other **solid** cuts of meat (beef, veal, pork, and lamb) until the juices run clear or until the meat has an internal temperature of at least 145°F (63°C). After the meat finishes cooking, let it rest for 3 minutes at room temperature before eating it.
- Cook **ground** beef, veal, pork, or lamb until it's no longer pink or until it has an internal temperature of at least 160°F (71°C). Cook ground chicken or turkey to 165°F (74°C).
- Cook chicken and other turkey until it's no longer pink or until it has an internal temperature of at least 165°F (74°C). Check chicken and turkey in several places — breast meat and leg meat — to be sure it's cooked.
- Cook fish until it is opaque and flaky when separated with a fork or until it has an internal temperature of 145°F (63°C).
- Scrub all fruits and veggies with plain water to remove any pesticides, dirt, or bacterial contamination.
- Remove the outer leaves of leafy greens, such as spinach or lettuce.
- Don't let eggs stay at room temperature for more than 2 hours.
- Make sure you cook eggs thoroughly so yolks or whites are firm. Scrambled eggs should not be runny.

Clean Up

Even though the kitchen might look clean, your hands, the countertops, and the utensils you use could still contain lots of bacteria that you can't even see. Yuck!

To prevent the spread of bacteria while you're preparing food:

- Always wash your hands with warm water and soap before preparing **any** food.
- Wash your hands after handling raw meat, poultry, fish, or egg products.
- Keep raw meats and their juices away from other foods in the refrigerator and on countertops.
- Never put cooked food on a dish that was holding raw meat, poultry, or fish.
- If you use knives and other utensils on raw meat, poultry, or fish, you need to wash them before using them to cut or handle something else.
- If you touch raw meat, poultry, or fish, wash your hands. **Don't** wipe them on a dish towel — this can contaminate the towel with bacteria, which may be spread to someone else's hands.
- Use one cutting board for raw meat, poultry, and fish, and another board for everything else.
- When you're done preparing food, wipe down the countertops with hot soapy water or a commercial or homemade cleaning solution. Consider using paper towels to clean surfaces. Don't forget to wash the dishes, utensils, and cutting board in hot, soapy water.
- Wash cutting boards — which can become a breeding ground for bacteria if they aren't cleaned carefully — separately from other dishes and utensils in hot, soapy water. Cutting boards can be sanitized with a homemade cleaning solution (1 tablespoon of chlorine bleach in 1 gallon of water). After washing and disinfecting the cutting board, rinse it thoroughly with plain water and pat with paper towels or leave it to air dry.
- Wash dirty dish towels in hot water.

Storing Leftovers Safely

Your dinner was a success and you're lucky to have some to enjoy later. Here are some tips on handling leftovers:

- Put leftovers in the fridge as soon as possible, within 2 hours. If you leave leftovers out for too long at room temperature, bacteria can quickly multiply, turning your delightful dish into a food poisoning disaster.
 - Store leftovers in containers with lids that can be snapped tightly shut. Bowls are OK for storing leftovers, but be sure to cover them tightly with plastic wrap or aluminum foil to keep the food from drying out.
 - Eat any leftovers within 3 to 4 days or freeze them. **Don't** freeze any dishes that contain uncooked fruit or veggies, hard-cooked eggs, or mayonnaise.
 - If you're freezing leftovers, freeze them in one- or two-portion servings, so they'll be easy to take out of the freezer, pop in the microwave, and eat.
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- Store leftovers in plastic containers, plastic bags, or aluminum foil. Don't fill bowls all the way to the top; when food is frozen, it expands. Leave a little extra space — about ½ inch (about 13 millimeters) should do it.

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microwave, don't use lighter plastics like margarine tubs or cottage cheese containers, which means that some of the chemicals in the plastic can melt them, which means that some of the chemicals in the plastic can get into the food.

Which Has More Germs — Your Toilet Seat or the Kitchen Sink?

Surprise! It's the sink. Turns out germs from raw meat linger in the sink and on the kitchen sponge, making them ickier than the toilet. (The toilet seat is still really germey, though, so wash your hands after going!)

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- Waxed paper is safe for use in the microwave, but don't ever use brown paper or brown grocery bags. And **never** use aluminum foil!
- When covering a plate or container with plastic wrap, try to keep the plastic wrap from touching the food.
- If a food comes packaged in a foam tray, remove it from the tray and be sure to take off any plastic wrapping before microwaving. The heat can make foam trays and plastic wrapping melt. And don't reuse trays that are included with microwave dinners or other foods.
- If you're using the microwave to **defrost** foods, finish cooking them right away.
- If you're using the microwave to **cook** foods, be sure to move the food inside the dish or stir it several times so it cooks thoroughly.
- If you're using the microwave to heat leftovers or frozen meals, the food should be very hot to the touch and steaming.
- Always carefully follow the microwave directions on the box, especially the length of cooking time that's specified.

Reviewed by: Mary L. Gavin, MD
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