Food Safety for Your Family

Reviewed by: [Mary L. Gavin, MD](#)

You read labels, buy fresh foods, and do your best to prepare tasty meals for your family. But one thing that might not cross your mind as you cook is food safety.

Why is food safety so important? Proper food preparation protects against foodborne illnesses from bacteria such as *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter,* and *Listeria* (which can cause diarrhea, fever, abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting, and dehydration).

Safety precautions include knowing how to select foods in the grocery store, then storing them properly and cooking them safely, plus cleaning up well afterward.

Here's how to make sure your kitchen and the foods you prepare in it are safe.

Buying Food

Buying safe food is the first step. To ensure freshness, refrigerated items (such as meat, dairy, eggs, and fish) should be put in your cart last. Keep meats separate from other items, especially produce. If your drive home is longer than 1 hour, consider putting these items in a cooler to keep them fresh.

When purchasing packaged meat, poultry, or fish, check the expiration date on the [label](#). Even if the expiration date is still acceptable, don't buy fish or meats that smell or look strange.

Also check inside egg cartons — make sure the eggs, which should be grade A or AA, are clean and free from cracks.

Don't buy:

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

Refrigerating and Freezing

Before you put the groceries away, check the temperature of your refrigerator and freezer. Your refrigerator should be set for 40°F (5°C) and your freezer should be set to 0°F (–18°C) or lower. These chilly temperatures will help keep any bacteria in your foods from multiplying. If your refrigerator doesn't have a thermostat, it's a good idea to invest in a thermometer for the fridge and freezer.

Of course, refrigerated and frozen items should be put away first. Here are some quick tips to remember for foods that need to be kept cool:

- Keep eggs in the original carton on a shelf in your refrigerator (most refrigerator doors don't keep eggs cold enough).
- Put meat, poultry, and fish in separate plastic bags so that their juices don't get on your other foods.
- Freeze — or cook — raw ground meat, poultry, or fish within 1 to 2 days.
- Freeze — or cook — fresh meat (steaks, chops, roasts) within 3 to 5 days.
- Keep unopened packages of hot dogs and deli meats in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks. Opened packages of hot dogs should be eaten within 1 week and deli meats within 3-5 days.

Follow these handling and cooking guidelines to help prevent foodborne illnesses in your family:

Preparing and Cooking Fruits and Vegetables

- Wash all fruits and vegetables with plain running water (even if you plan to peel them) to remove any pesticide residue, dirt, or bacteria. Scrub firm produce, such as carrots, cucumbers, or melons, with a clean produce brush.
- Wash melons, such as cantaloupes and watermelons, before eating to avoid carrying bacteria from the rind to the knife to the inside of the fruit.
- Remove the outer leaves of leafy greens, such as spinach or lettuce.

Preparing and Cooking Raw Meat, Poultry, Fish, and Egg Products

- Wash your hands with warm water and soap before preparing foods and 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 wash raw chicken. Washing raw meat and poultry can spread germs around the kitchen. Germs are killed during cooking when chicken reaches an internal temperature of 165°F (74°C). So washing doesn't help.
- Designate one cutting board for raw meat, poultry, and fish.
- Use separate utensils for cooking and serving raw meat, poultry, fish, or eggs.
- Never put cooked food on a dish that was holding raw meat, poultry, or fish.
- Thaw meat, poultry, and fish in the refrigerator or microwave, never at room temperature.
- Cook thawed meat, poultry, and fish immediately.
- Throw away any leftover uncooked meat, poultry, or fish marinades.
- Remove stuffing from poultry after cooking and store it separately in the refrigerator.
- Do not allow raw eggs to sit at room temperature for more than 2 hours to reduce the risk of *Salmonella* infection.
- Thoroughly cook eggs.
- **Never** serve foods that contain raw eggs, such as uncooked cookie dough, homemade eggnog, mousse, and homemade ice cream. If you want to use these recipes, substitute pasteurized eggs (found in the grocery store's dairy case) for raw eggs.

- Cook meat until the juices run clear.
- Cook ground beef or poultry until it's no longer pink.

Use a meat thermometer to tell whether meats are cooked thoroughly. (Place the thermometer in the thickest portion of the meat and away from bones or fat and wash the probe between uses.) Most thermometers indicate at which temperature the type of meat is safely cooked, or you can refer to these recommendations:

- poultry (whole, pieces, and ground): 165°F (74°C)
- whole cuts (steaks, roasts, and chops) of beef, veal, pork, and lamb: 145°F (63°C) with a 3-minute rest period before carving or eating
- ground beef, veal, pork, and lamb: 160°F (71°C)
- fish: 145°F (63°C)
- egg dishes: 160°F (71°C)
- leftovers: at least 165°F (74°C)

When cooking, broiling, or grilling meats on the stove, turn them over at least once. In the microwave, cover all meats and:

- Turn patties over, stir, or rotate foods halfway through cooking. Cook large pieces of meat on medium (50%) power for longer periods to ensure meat is cooked in center.
- Cooking times may vary so use a food thermometer to be sure food has reached a safe minimum internal temperature.
- Always allow standing time, which completes the cooking, before checking the internal temperature with a food thermometer.

Cleaning Up

Clean food is just one part of the food safety equation. You also need to be sure that your kitchen surfaces and your hands are clean to prevent the spread of bacteria.

- Refrigerate any leftovers as soon as possible after cooking. If left to sit at room temperature, bacteria in the food will multiply quickly.
- Consume leftovers within 3 to 4 days or throw them out.
- 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.
- Don't use old cutting boards with cracks or deep gouges because bacteria may hide in the crevices of the board.
- Wash your hands if they come in contact with raw meat, poultry, or fish.
- Don't use a dish towel to wipe your hands after handling raw meat, poultry, fish, or eggs — use paper towels instead. Bacteria can contaminate the cloth towels and can then spread to another person's hands.

- After preparing food, wipe your kitchen counters and other exposed surfaces with hot soapy water or a commercial or homemade cleaning solution. Consider using paper towels to clean surfaces.
- Because sponges stay wet longer and their porous quality attracts bacteria, experts recommend using a thinner dishrag that can dry between uses instead of a sponge.
- Wash dirty dishrags and towels in hot soapy water.
- Periodically sanitize your kitchen sink, drain, and garbage disposal by pouring in a commercial or homemade cleaning solution.

Taking these simple precautions can reduce the chance of foodborne illnesses in your family.

Reviewed by: Mary L. Gavin, MD
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Food Safety for Your Family

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1. Proper food _____ protects against foodborne illnesses from bacteria such as E. coli, Salmonella, Campylobacter and Listeria.
2. To ensure freshness, refrigerated item such as meat, dairy eggs and fish, should be put in your cart first.
   True or False?
3. Your refrigerator should be set for _____ and your freezer to _____ or lower.
4. Put meat, poultry and fish in _____ plastic bags so that their juices don't get on your other foods.
5. Wash melons, such as cantaloupes and watermelon, before eating to avoid carrying _____ from the rind to the knife to the inside of the fruit
6. Washing _____ meat and poultry can spread germs around the kitchen.
7. Use a meat _____ to tell whether meats are cooked thoroughly.
8. Refrigerate any leftovers as soon as possible after cooking. If left to sit at room temperature, bacteria in the food will multiply quickly.
   True or False?
9. Don't use a dish towel to wipe your hands after handling raw meat, poultry, fish or eggs, use _____ _____ instead.
10. Periodically _____ your kitchen sink, drain and garbage disposal by pouring in a commercial or homemade cleaning solution.

January 2021 Quiz Answers. 1.Role Model 2.False 3.New Foods 4.Preparation
5.Five 6.Protein 7.Fiber 8.Control 9.Predictable 10.Age-Appropriate

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