

Keeping Foods Safe at Home

Of the millions of cases of foodborne illness that occur each year, most can be prevented. The U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) advises using these strategies to keep foods safe at home:

Buy and use a food thermometer. It's the only way to know if meat, poultry and fish are cooked safely. You can't tell just by looking.

Use an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator and check to make sure that the temperature is 40 °F or below. In the freezer, make sure the thermometer reads 0 °F or below. Bacteria grow rapidly at temperatures above 40 °F. If the power goes out you will know what temperatures were reached and will be able to make informed decisions about the safety of food in the refrigerator and freezer.

Do not leave pizza sitting out on the table or a "doggie" bag in the car overnight. Foods should not be left out more than two hours at room temperature or 1 hour if it is over 90 °F. When in doubt, throw it out.

Do not defrost a turkey in the garage or in the trunk of the car. The only safe way to defrost food is in the refrigerator, in cold water or in the microwave.

Wash hands and all food preparation surfaces with soap and water before and after touching raw meat, poultry or fish. Bacteria on raw meat, fish or poultry can contaminate other foods such as bread or lettuce that will not be cooked.

Do not feed "leftovers" or "take-out" food that's no longer fit for people to pets. Animals can also be stricken with foodborne illnesses.

Do not leave "take-out" or "ready-to-eat" food in the refrigerator so long that it's forgotten. You can't tell by looking at or smelling if a food is unsafe. Throw it away after three days and never taste a food when you don't know what it is or how long it has been in the refrigerator!

Do not lick the spoon or the bowl of homemade cookie dough or cake batter made with raw eggs. Even one taste of raw dough could contain harmful *Salmonella* bacteria resulting in a very unpleasant and potentially dangerous illness.

When grilling outdoors, use a clean plate for the cooked hamburgers, hot dogs or other meat or fish. Don't use the same plate that held raw meat! Juices from raw meat, poultry or fish could contaminate your cooked food.

Separate cooked foods from uncooked foods when preparing a meal, including using separate cutting boards and knives. Cross-contamination could cause harmful bacteria from one food to be transferred to another food.

Always put an ice pack in a child's lunch box or a lunch bag taken to the office if it includes perishable foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, milk or eggs. Foods in lunch boxes sitting in warm classrooms or offices could result in foodborne illnesses. Children under the age of 10 are the most vulnerable.

Do not "save money" by buying dented cans or cracked jars. Never use food from damaged containers. This applies to containers that are leaking, bulging or badly dented. Do not use food from cracked jars with loose or bulging lids, canned food with a foul odor or any container that spurts liquid when you open it. It's not worth taking a risk to save a few pennies.

Put meat and poultry packages in plastic bags at the meat counter before putting them in the grocery cart. Leaking packages from meat or poultry could contaminate other foods in the cart, leading to foodborne illnesses.

For answers to questions about food safety, call the Home and Garden Information Center toll-free at 1-888-656-9988. Do not guess about food safety because the health of your family and friends is at stake.

Source:USDA (Dec. 2004). *New Year's Resolutions to Keep You Safe*. [WWW document]. URL http://www.fsis.usda.gov/News_&_Events/NR_122704_01/index.asp

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Information Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University.

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