

## Deli and Other Take-Out Foods

Deli sandwich meats, rotisserie chicken, hamburgers, Mexican food, Chinese food and pizza are all examples of take-out foods that have become a regular part of our American lifestyle. How should these foods be handled to make sure they are safe to eat?

The same basic food safety rules apply to prepared foods bought from a deli or restaurant as to those prepared in the home.

### KEEP TAKE-OUT FOODS AT SAFE TEMPERATURES

- Do not leave perishable take-out foods at room temperature longer than two hours. Discard food that has been left at room temperature longer than two hours. For room temperatures over 90 °F, discard food after one hour.
- Refrigerate cold foods at 40 °F or lower until serving time.
- If the food is hot, and you'll be eating within two hours, keep it hot (140 °F internal temperature) in a 200 °F to 250 °F oven. Keeping food warm is not enough because harmful bacteria can multiply at temperatures between 40 and 140 °F. Covering with foil will help keep the food moist while in the oven.
- Chafing dishes or slow cookers that have been pre-heated can also keep hot food hot (140 °F or above). Check the internal temperature of food with a meat thermometer.
- If you are picking up hot foods far in advance, refrigerate them. "Thick foods" such as stews and layers of meat slices should be put in shallow dishes and limited to a depth of 2 inches so they cool faster.

- When ready to eat, reheat foods thoroughly to a temperature of 165 °F or until hot and steaming.
- If reheating in the microwave oven, cover food and rotate it so it heats evenly. Allow stand time for more even heating. Consult your microwave owner's manual for recommended cooking time, power level and stand time. Inadequate heating can contribute to illness.

### STORE TAKE-OUT FOODS PROPERLY

Refrigerate leftovers promptly in shallow, covered containers. For longer storage, wrap tightly in moisture- and vapor-proof freezing materials and store in the freezer.

#### Recommended Refrigerator Storage Times at 40 °F or below:

Cooked meat or poultry	3 to 4 days
Fried chicken	3 to 4 days
Pizza	3 to 4 days
Deli-sliced luncheon meats	3 to 5 days
Deli-prepared convenience foods such as egg, tuna and macaroni salads	3 to 5 days

Foods stored longer may begin to spoil or become unsafe to eat.

#### Recommended Freezer Storage Times at 0 °F or below:

Cooked meat or poultry dishes	3 to 6 months
Fried chicken	4 months
Deli-sliced luncheon meats	1 to 2 months
Deli-prepared convenience foods	3 to 4 months

Salads made with mayonnaise do not freeze well. Foods kept frozen longer than recommended are safe, but their quality may not be as good.

## REHEAT LEFTOVERS SAFELY

Foods that are served hot should be reheated thoroughly to a temperature of 165 °F or until hot and steamy. Soups and gravies should be brought to a rolling boil. Remove food from plastic wrap, styrofoam and plastic containers before reheating in the oven or microwave.

## ARE TAKE-OUT FOODS SAFE FOR EVERYONE?

Pregnant women and individuals with chronic illnesses that result in weakened immune systems are more likely to be seriously affected by food-borne illnesses and need to be particularly cautious of certain ready-to-eat foods. *Listeria monocytogenes* is a foodborne bacterium that can cause miscarriages in pregnant women and illness in newborns and individuals with weakened immune systems. These bacteria can be found in a variety of foods including unpasteurized milk and soft cheeses and some ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs or deli meats. At-risk individuals should avoid these latter foods unless they can be reheated until they are steaming hot.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Question:** It's tradition -- on the way to the football game, we pick up chicken and eat on it for a couple of hours before the game, put it in the back seat while we are at the game and then pull the food back out after the game. I now know that might not be safe, so what should we do?

**Answer:**

- Keep any leftover chicken and other perishable foods in an insulated cooler with sufficient ice or ice packs to keep the food at 40 °F.
- Use a separate cooler for drinks so the one containing perishable food will not be constantly opened and closed.
- Keep the cooler in the shade. Keep the lid closed and replenish the ice if it melts.
- If you do not have a cooler available, eat perishable foods such as fried chicken within two hours of purchasing (one hour if temperatures are 90 °F or higher).

**Question:** Late at night, our teenage children and their friends order pizza. They can never seem to remember to put it in the fridge before going to bed. Is it safe to eat the next day?

**Answer:** No, pizza is a perishable food and must be kept refrigerated. If the pizza is left out of the refrigerator for more than two hours, it should be discarded.

**Question:** At the office party, we had several pounds of deli meats left over. How should they be handled?

**Answer:** If deli meats were kept in the refrigerator and brought out only to replenish trays as needed, then they can safely be kept for later use.

- Discard perishable foods that have been left out of the refrigerator for more than two hours.
- Divide leftovers and refrigerate what you will use in a day or two.
- Wrap the remainder in a moisture- and vapor-proof wrap to store in the freezer.

For more information on the special needs of pregnant women and the chronically ill, request HGIC 3640, *Food Safety for Mothers and Babies*, and HGIC 3643, *Food Safety for the Chronically Ill*.

For more information on proper food storage, request HGIC 3522, *Food Storage: Refrigerator and Freezer*, and HGIC 3065, *Freezing Prepared Foods*.

SOURCE:

USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. *Take Out Foods*.

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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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