



The Office Refrigerator... A heavenly vision or a tale from the crypt?

Horror stories about office refrigerators – many of us have a few to share. Tales of fuzzy and fermented foods are common, and unfortunately so are incidences of employees becoming sick from eating foods at work.

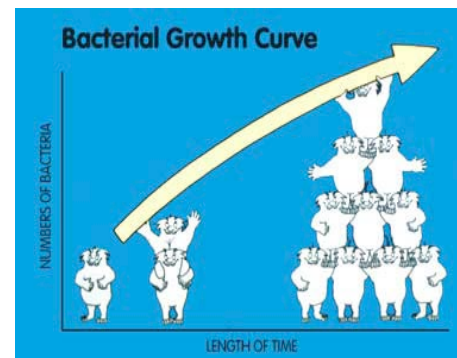
Many offices find it helpful to have an “office refrigerator policy.” Before developing such a policy some knowledge about keeping food safe might be helpful. Test your refrigerator food safety savvy.

Reply YES or NO to the following questions:

1. Is it safe to leave perishable foods at room temperature for longer than TWO hours TOTAL time? (Perishable foods include: meat, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu; dairy products; cooked pasta, rice and vegetables; fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables.)
2. Is it OK to refrigerate foods while they are still warm?
3. Should you EAT refrigerated leftovers within a day or two for safety and quality?
4. Should you keep your refrigerator at 40 degrees or lower?
5. Can you always see, smell or taste bacteria that cause food-borne illness?

Answers:

1. No. Refrigerate perishable foods so the TOTAL time they're at room temperature is less than 2 hours. Under ideal conditions, including Hawaii room temperatures, just ONE bacterium in these foods could grow to 2,097,152 in 7 hours!
2. YES. Just leave the container cover slightly cracked until the food has cooled. Refrigerate foods in shallow containers to speed cooling.
3. YES. Eat refrigerated leftovers promptly.
4. YES. Keeping your refrigerator at 40 degrees F or lower slows bacterial growth. Keep your freezer at 0 degrees F or lower, which stops most bacterial growth. Freezing DOES NOT kill bacteria. Keep an appliance thermometer in your refrigerator and in you freezer to assure they stay at these recommended temperatures.





5. NO. When in doubt, throw it out! You can't always see, smell or taste bacteria that cause food-borne illness. It takes from 1/2 hour to 6 weeks before you get sick from contaminated food.

Suggestions for your office refrigerator policy

1. Keep some type of marking pen/tape in the break room for people to use in labeling their food. This helps track down owners of unclaimed reusable food containers.
2. Any perishable item to be shared with staff should be labeled "For Staff." It should also be labeled with the date it was refrigerated and the name of the person responsible for it. Anything not eaten by the third day will be thrown away – no questions asked.



REMEMBER: Perishable foods include: meat, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu; dairy products; cooked pasta, rice and vegetables; fresh peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables.

3. If you put things in the break room to be shared, make sure you use safe food procedures. For example, perishable food should not be left at room temperature for more than 2 hours. This includes the original time it was set out for serving. Refrigerate perishable food in **SHALLOW** containers for quicker chilling.

Rather than leave perishable foods on the break room table or counter, the food can be refrigerated and a note left in plain sight instead. The note might say: "Help yourself to the ... in the refrigerator."

4. "For Staff" foods such as ice cream, ice cream topping, condiments, etc. should be labeled with a date. They will be thrown away periodically, based on their "use by" date or general appearance.

Each day (give a specific day – frequently Friday is listed) anything left in the refrigerator will be thrown away by (give a time here).

If you spill something in the refrigerator, clean it up.

Toss food item **ONLY** into trash cans that are emptied **DAILY**. Letting food and food containers sit in trash cans for several days may cause problems with pests, bacteria and odors.



Implementing and Reinforcing a Refrigerator Policy

Develop a policy with input from staff, and inform everyone when the policy will begin. Post the policy on the refrigerator, break room bulletin board, office intranet, in an office policy and procedure manual and/or someplace readily accessible by staff.

As you begin to implement a policy, send out reminders that food will be tossed by a specific date/time unless labeled. Be prepared to modify the policy as new situations arise. Initially, it may seem wasteful to toss unclaimed food, but consider the following:

- . Unsafe “mystery” food (no name/no date), that is taken from the refrigerator and offered to others, may make people sick.
- . More money is lost when food is left in the refrigerator to spoil that if people learn to eat it in a timely manner.
- . When a refrigerator is filled with unsafe foods, there’s a possibility an unsafe food will contaminate other foods, especially if the refrigerator is packed.

FOLLOW THROUGH on tossing any unlabeled food on clean-out-the-refrigerator day. Someone should be accountable for cleaning food out of the refrigerator once a week - rotating this responsibility will help to convince everyone to follow the policies. Don't forget – It's also important to periodically clean the **INTERIOR** of the refrigerator.

“Cleaning Up the Office Refrigerator,” **FOOD REFLECTIONS** Newsletter, September 2002, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County

Visit our Nutrition Education for Wellness site: <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/NEW>.

