



Be Safe:

A Home Guide to Help Keep Food Safe

This guide contains recommendations on how you can keep your food safe and avoid foodborne illness. Through properly storing, preparing, cooking, serving, and handling foods, you can greatly reduce your chances of getting sick . . . be *safe*.

Foodborne illness, often called “food poisoning,” results from eating contaminated foods. When food is not handled properly, microorganisms that cause foodborne illness can contaminate it. These include bacteria, viruses, parasites, and molds. All can cause serious illnesses, but bacteria are the most common culprits.

Symptoms of foodborne illness include nausea, vomiting, cramps, diarrhea, and mild fever. What some thought was the flu might actually have been foodborne illness. A foodborne illness may develop within half an hour to a few days; some may occur as long as two or more weeks after eating a contaminated food.

While a case of foodborne illness is unpleasant for anyone, it can be particularly dangerous for older adults, people with weakened immune systems, infants and children, and pregnant women. Fortunately, foodborne illness is preventable. Follow this guide to help keep your food safe.

If you filled out the questionnaire (reproduced on page 4) before reading this, look for the stars (*) in the paragraphs below—they mark the information you need to know to give the “right” answers to the questionnaire.



Here are the keys to safe food handling:

- Buy cold food last, get it home fast.
- Keep food safe—refrigerate.
- Keep everything clean.
- Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator.
- Cook foods thoroughly.
- Keep hot foods hot, cold foods cold.
- Don't wait—refrigerate leftovers quickly.

1 *Buying food:* **Buy cold foods last, get them home fast.**

- Shop for frozen and refrigerated foods and hot items from the deli last, just before going to the checkout counter.[☆]
- Make sure frozen foods feel rock solid and refrigerated foods feel cold.
- Check the “sell-by” date (how long the grocer can keep the produce for sale on the shelf) and the “use-by” date (how long you can keep the product at home at its best quality) on packages before you buy.[☆]
- When you check out, be sure that your raw meats, poultry, and seafood are placed in separate bags to prevent the transfer of juices and bacteria.
- Use a cooler for cold foods if it will take you more than 30 minutes to get home.

2 *Storing food:* **Keep it safe—refrigerate!**

- Arriving home from shopping, unload the perishable foods first, going directly from the car to the refrigerator or freezer.[☆]
- Keep the refrigerator temperature between 34° and 40°F. The freezer should be at or below 0°F.
- Space items in the refrigerator and freezer so the cold air can freely circulate.
- Use fresh meat and poultry within 3–4 days. When ground, meat, poultry, and fish should be used within 1–2 days.
- Wrap raw meat, poultry, and fish or place in separate plastic bags in the meat drawer or on a plate on the lowest shelf of the refrigerator to keep juices from dripping on other foods.

3 *Preparing food:* **Keep everything clean.** **Thaw frozen food in the refrigerator.**

- Wash your hands with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds before starting any food preparation. If you stop to do something else, like use the bathroom, change a diaper, blow your nose, or touch a pet, be sure to wash your hands again before continuing food preparation.[☆]
- Bandage any cuts or sores on your hands, or use plastic gloves.
- Make sure all kitchen helpers have clean hands too.
- Plan ahead and thaw foods in the refrigerator. Thaw foods on a plate or in a plastic bag on the lowest shelf in the refrigerator to collect any juices and moisture.[☆]
- For faster thawing, place food in a leakproof plastic bag and immerse in cold water. Change the water about every 30 minutes. Cook food immediately after thawing.
- To thaw in a microwave oven, place frozen food in a microwave-safe container and defrost on “low” or “defrost” setting. Finish cooking food right after thawing.
- Clean work surfaces often to remove food particles and spills. Use paper towels to wipe up spilled meat, poultry, or fish juice, then use sanitizing solution.
- Never chop vegetables, salad ingredients, or other ready-to-eat foods on a cutting board that was used for raw meat or poultry without first cleaning and sanitizing it.[☆]
- After cutting raw meat, poultry, or seafood, wash cutting boards and utensils with hot, soapy water and sanitize them.
- Use plastic cutting boards rather than wooden ones for cutting raw meat, poultry, or seafood (bacteria can be trapped in the grooves of the wood).
- Change kitchen towels often and launder in hot water. Clean sponges and dishcloths frequently, using soap and hot water. Disinfect in a solution of $\frac{3}{4}$ cup liquid bleach and 1 gallon water; soak for 2 minutes; rinse and air dry. Do this once a week or more often as needed.[☆]

4 **Cooking food:** Cook it thoroughly.

- Never partially cook foods and then refrigerate or set them aside to finish cooking later.
- Cook meat (especially ground meat), poultry, and fish thoroughly. Use a meat or instant-reading thermometer to check internal temperature. Use this chart as a guide:

Product	Internal, cooked temperature (°F)
Ground meat (patties or meatloaf)	160°
All poultry (whole bird or parts)	165°
Steaks and roasts	
medium rare	145°
medium	160°
well done	170°
Pork and ham	160°
Fish	flakes with a fork
Eggs	
Fried, poached.....	yolk, white are firm
Casseroles, sauces, custards.....	160°

5 **Serving food:** Keep hot foods hot, cold foods cold.

- Do not leave cooked food out at room temperature for more than 2 hours.
- For buffets, put hot foods over a heat source and cold foods on ice. Do not mix fresh (unserved) food with food that has already been out for serving.[☆]
- For away from home, pack food in an insulated container or cooler with a freeze-pack or ice. Keep it away from direct sun.

6 **Handling leftovers:** Don't wait . . . refrigerate!

- Refrigerate foods within 2 hours after cooking.[☆]
- Put food in shallow containers for quick chilling.
- Freeze leftovers that will not be eaten within 2 days.
- Reheat leftovers to 165°F or until steaming hot. Boil leftover soups, sauces, and gravies for at least 1 minute before serving.
- Unsafe food does not always smell, taste, or look bad. **When in doubt, throw it out.**[☆]

How to sanitize food-preparation surfaces

First, clean surface with hot, soapy water and rinse. Then, do the following:

For hard, non-porous surfaces:

Use 1 Tbsp. liquid bleach**
in 1 gallon of water.
Leave wet for 2 minutes.
Don't rinse; allow to air-dry.

For porous surfaces:

Use 3 Tbsp. liquid bleach**
in 1 gallon of water.
Leave wet for 2 minutes.
Rinse and wipe dry or air-dry.

**Keep all cleaning products away from children. Do not mix liquid bleach with other cleaning products such as toilet bowl cleaners or ammonia.

What do you do?

Circle YES, No, or SOMETIMES in response to each statement.

When grocery shopping, I pick up refrigerated and frozen foods just before checking out. YES No SOMETIMES

I check the “sell-by” or “use-by” dates on packages when shopping or eating. YES No SOMETIMES

When I bring my groceries home, I refrigerate cold foods immediately. YES No SOMETIMES

I wash my hands before I prepare food. YES No SOMETIMES

I keep raw meat or poultry juice away from other foods, either by using separate cutting boards and utensils or washing these with soap and hot water between uses. YES No SOMETIMES

I always thaw frozen meat in the refrigerator. After preparing foods, I keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. YES No SOMETIMES

I refrigerate my leftovers immediately. YES No SOMETIMES

Spoiled leftover food does not always smell, taste, or look bad—when in doubt, I throw it out. YES No SOMETIMES

I keep kitchen towels and sponges clean. YES No SOMETIMES