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Healthy Eating & Food Safety

Food can be unsafe for many reasons. It might be contaminated by germs—microbes such as bacteria, viruses, or molds. These microbes might have been present before the food was harvested or collected, or they could have been introduced during handling or preparation. In either case, the food might look fine but could make you very sick. Food can also be unsafe because it has “gone bad.” Sometimes, you may see mold growing on the surface.

Avoid Getting Sick From Your Food

For an older person, a food-related illness can be life-threatening. As you age, you have more trouble fighting off microbes. Health problems, like diabetes or kidney disease, also make you more likely to get sick from eating foods that are unsafe. So be careful about how food is prepared and stored.

⇒ **Watch this VIDEO:** [Start at the Store: Prevent Foodborne Illness](#)

Some foods present higher risks than others. Here are some tips on selecting lower-risk food options:

- Eat fish, shellfish, meat, and poultry that have been cooked to a safe minimum internal temperature, instead of eating the food raw or undercooked.
- Drink pasteurized milk and juices instead of the unpasteurized versions.
- Make sure pasteurized eggs or egg products are used in recipes that call for raw or undercooked eggs, such as homemade Caesar salad dressings, raw cookie dough, or eggnog.
- Always wash vegetables, including all salad ingredients, before eating. Cooked vegetables also are a lower-risk option than raw vegetables.
- Choose cooked sprouts instead of raw sprouts.
- Choose hard or processed cheeses, cream cheese, or mozzarella, or any cheese that is clearly labeled “Made from Pasteurized Milk” instead of soft cheese made

from unpasteurized (raw) milk, such as Brie, Camembert, blue-veined, or queso fresco.

- Heat up hot dogs, deli meats, and luncheon meats to 165 °F (steaming hot), instead of eating the meat unheated.

Changing Taste and Smell

As you grow older, your senses of taste and smell might change. Or medicines might make things taste different. If you can't rely on your sense of taste or smell to tell that food is spoiled, be extra careful about how you handle your food. If something doesn't look, smell, or taste right, throw it out—don't take a chance with your health.

Smart Storage

Food safety starts with storing your food properly. Sometimes that's as simple as following directions on the container. For example, if the label says "refrigerate after opening," do that! It's also a good idea to keep any canned and packaged items in a cool place.

When you are ready to use a packaged food, check the date on the label. That bottle of juice might have been in your cabinet so long it is now out of date. (See [Reading Food Labels](#) to understand the date on the food label.)

Try to use refrigerated leftovers within 3 or 4 days to reduce your risk of food poisoning. Throw away foods older than that or those that show moldy areas.

For recommended refrigerator and freezer storage times for common foods, download our [Storing Cold Food tip sheet](#) (PDF, 75K).

Foods and Medicines

Some foods, and also caffeine and alcohol, are unsafe to take with certain [medicines](#). A food-medicine interaction can prevent a medicine from working the way it should, cause a side effect from a medicine to get worse, cause a new side effect, or change the way your body processes the food or medicine. For example, some statins (cholesterol medicines) act differently on the body if you consume large amounts of grapefruit juice. Every time you use a new medicine, check the label for interactions. If you have any questions, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

Food Safety When Cooking

When preparing foods, follow four basic steps—clean, separate, cook, and chill.

Clean

Wash your hands, the cutting board, and the counter with hot, soapy water, and make knives and other utensils are clean before you start to prepare food. Clean the lids of cans before opening. Rinse fruits and vegetables under running water, but do not use soap or detergent. Do not rinse raw meat or poultry before cooking—you might contaminate other things by splashing disease-causing microbes around.

Keep your refrigerator clean, especially the vegetable and meat bins. When there is a spill, use hot, soapy water to clean it up.

Separate

Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs (and their juices and shells) away from foods that won't be cooked. That begins in your grocery cart—put raw vegetables and fruit in one part of the cart, maybe the top part.

Products like meat and fish should be put in the plastic bags and placed in a separate part of the cart. At check-out, make sure the raw meat and seafood aren't mixed with other items in your bags.

When you get home, keep things like raw meat separate from fresh fruit and vegetables (even in your refrigerator). Don't let the raw meat juices drip on foods that won't be cooked before they are eaten.

When you are cooking, it is also important to keep ready-to-eat foods like fresh produce or bread apart from food that will be cooked. Use a different knife and cutting board for fresh produce than you use for raw meat, poultry, and seafood. Or, use one set, and cut all the fresh produce before handling foods that will be cooked.

Wash your utensils and cutting board in hot, soapy water or the dishwasher, and clean the counter and your hands afterward. If you put raw meat, poultry, or seafood on a plate, wash the plate in hot, soapy water before reusing it for cooked food.

Cook

Use a food thermometer. Put it in the thickest part of the food you are cooking to check that the inside has reached the right temperature. The chart below shows what the temperature should be inside food before you stop cooking it. No more runny fried eggs or hamburgers that are pink in the middle.

Bring sauces, marinades, soups, and gravy to a boil when reheating.

Food Tip

You may have always thought you should let hot foods cool before putting them in the refrigerator. Not true. Putting hot food items in the fridge as soon as possible will keep bacteria from growing in your food. Divide food into smaller portions, place in shallow containers, and refrigerate.

U.S. Department of Agriculture-Recommended Safe Minimum Internal Temperatures

Type of Food	Minimum Internal Temperature
All meats and seafood	145 °F (with a 3-minute rest time)
All ground meats	160 °F
Egg dishes	160 °F
All poultry	165 °F
Hot dogs and luncheon meats	165 °F

No matter what temperature you set your oven at, the temperature inside your food needs to reach the level shown here to be safe.

Chill

Keeping foods cold slows the growth of microbes, so your refrigerator should always be at 40 °F or below. The freezer should be at 0 °F or below. But just because you set the thermostat for 40 °F doesn't mean it actually reaches that temperature. Use refrigerator/freezer thermometers to check.

Put food in the refrigerator within 2 hours of buying or cooking it. If the outside temperature is over 90 °F, refrigerate within 1 hour. Put leftovers in a clean, shallow container that is covered and dated. Use or freeze leftovers within 3 to 4 days. For recommended refrigerator and freezer storage times for common foods, download our [Storing Cold Food tip sheet](#) (PDF, 75K).

Food Safety When Eating Out

It's nice to take a break from cooking or get together with others for a meal at a restaurant. But, do you think about food safety when you eat out? You should.

- Pick a tidy place with clean tables and floors.
- If your city or state requires restaurants to post a cleanliness rating near the front door, check it out.
- Don't be afraid to ask the waiter or waitress how items on the menu are prepared. For example, could you have the tuna cooked well instead of seared? Or, if you find out the Caesar salad dressing is made with raw eggs, ask for another salad dressing.
- Consider avoiding buffets. Sometimes food in buffets sits out for a while and might not be kept at the proper temperature—whether hot or cold.
- If you take leftovers home, get them into the refrigerator within 2 hours—sooner if the temperature outside is above 90 °F.

Read about [this topic in Spanish](#). Lea sobre [este tema en español](#).

For More Information on Food Safety

USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion

1-703-305-7600

www.fns.usda.gov/cnpp

National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs

1-202-682-6899

www.nanasp.org

USDA Food and Nutrition Information Center

National Agricultural Library

1-301-504-5755

fnic@ars.usda.gov

www.nal.usda.gov/fnic

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