

8 ways to prevent food poisoning at home

Despite the occasional news report of an outbreak of food poisoning, food supplies in the United States are inspected and generally very safe. But it's impossible to keep the entire food supply completely free of potentially dangerous bacteria. For this reason, you need to take precautions at home to prevent food poisoning. Food poisoning, also referred to as food-borne illness, is a gastrointestinal disorder caused by eating contaminated food. Most often, food poisoning occurs because the food has been incorrectly handled, improperly cooked or inadequately stored. The following steps can help reduce your chances of getting food poisoning.

1. Wash your hands, utensils and food surfaces often
You've heard it before, but keeping your hands, utensils and food preparation surfaces clean can prevent cross-contamination — the transfer of harmful bacteria from one surface to another. If harmful bacteria spread to your hands, utensils, cutting boards and other foods, you and others stand a greater chance of ingesting those microorganisms and becoming ill. Wash your hands thoroughly with warm, soapy water before and after handling or preparing food, especially raw meat, poultry, fish, shellfish and eggs. Then use hot, soapy water to wash the utensils, cutting board and other surfaces you used.
2. Keep raw foods separate from ready-to-eat foods
When shopping, preparing food or storing food, keep raw meat, poultry, fish and shellfish away from other foods. This prevents cross-contamination from one food to another. Here are ideas for keeping foods separated:
 - Separate your meat and poultry products from the rest of your groceries. Tightly wrap raw meat packages in plastic bags so that leaking juices won't contaminate other food.
 - Use separate cutting boards for raw meats and other ready-to-eat foods such as breads and vegetables.
 - Use one plate for raw meats and use another plate after the meat is cooked.
3. Cook foods to a safe temperature
Cook your food thoroughly. Remember, contaminated food often looks and smells normal. The best way to tell if meat, poultry or egg dishes are cooked to a safe temperature is to use a food thermometer. Using a food thermometer is the only sure way to know if your food has reached a high enough temperature to destroy bacteria. You can kill harmful organisms in most foods by cooking them to temperatures between 140 F and 180 F.
4. Refrigerate or freeze perishable foods promptly
Harmful bacteria can reproduce rapidly if foods aren't properly cooled. Refrigerate or freeze perishable foods within two hours of purchasing or preparing them. If the room temperature is above 90 F, refrigerate perishable foods within one hour. Freeze ground meat, poultry, fish and shellfish unless you expect to eat it within two days. Freeze other beef, veal, lamb or pork within three to five days.
5. Defrost food safely
Bacteria can reproduce rapidly on meat, poultry and fish at room temperature. So, to defrost food safely, use one of these methods:
 - In the refrigerator. Tightly wrap meat, poultry and fish so the juices don't drip on other food as they thaw in the refrigerator. Once defrosted, use ground meat, poultry and fish within one or two days, other meat within three to five days.
 - In the microwave. Use the "defrost" or "50 percent power" setting to help avoid cooking the edges of the food while the rest remains frozen. If the meat, poultry or fish is in pieces, separate them during the thawing process to ensure that no areas remain frozen. Cook food immediately after thawing in the microwave.
 - In cold water. Put food in a sealed package or plastic bag and immerse in cold water; change the water every 30 minutes. Or place the sealed food package under cold, running water. Cook food immediately after defrosting.
6. Use caution when serving food
Harmful bacteria can grow rapidly when prepared food sits without proper heating or cooling — especially during buffets or outdoor parties. Here are tips for serving foods safely:
 - Throw out any leftovers that have been at room temperature for more than two hours or in hot weather for more than an hour.
 - If cold food needs to sit out for longer than two hours, use a tray of ice (ice bath) under the food to keep it cold. Replace the ice as it melts. When using an ice bath, try to keep the cold food in a shallow container, as this makes it easier to keep all of the food — including the center — properly chilled.
 - If hot food must sit out for longer than two hours, use warming trays, slow cookers or chafing dishes to keep the food hot.
7. Throw it out when in doubt
If you aren't sure if a food has been prepared, served or stored safely, discard it. Food left at room temperature too long may contain bacteria or toxins that can't be destroyed by cooking. Don't taste food that you're unsure about — just throw it out. Even if it looks and smells fine, it may not be safe to eat.
8. Know when to avoid certain foods altogether
Food poisoning is especially serious and potentially life-threatening for young children, pregnant women and their fetuses, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems. These individuals are at greatest risk of severe health problems from food poisoning and should take extra precautions by avoiding the following foods:
 - Raw or rare meat and poultry
 - Raw or undercooked fish or shellfish, including oysters, clams, mussels and scallops
 - Raw or undercooked eggs or foods that may contain them, such as cookie dough and homemade ice cream
 - Raw sprouts, such as alfalfa, bean, clover or radish sprouts
 - Unpasteurized juices and ciders
 - Unpasteurized milk and milk products
 - Soft cheeses (such as feta, brie and Camembert), blue-veined cheese and unpasteurized cheese
 - Refrigerated pates and meat spreads
 - Uncooked hotdogs, luncheon meats and deli meats

Preventing food poisoning: The bottom line
Keep hot food hot and cold food cold. And keep everything — especially your hands — clean. If you follow these basic rules, you'll be less likely to become ill from food poisoning.

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