

Food Safety Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What is the most important rule for safe food preparation in the home?

A. Keep it clean...keep everything clean! This rule applies to hands, utensils, cutting boards, counter tops, dish clothes, and towels. Wash your hands with hot soapy water and keep your work area clean and uncluttered. Using a chlorine bleach solution (1 teaspoon of bleach to 1 quart of water) or kitchen cleaning agent is very effective in sanitizing countertops and sinks. Don't forget about your cutting boards too. Always use cutting boards made of hard maple wood or plastic, and make sure they are free of cracks and crevices, which are perfect hiding places for bacteria! Wash and sanitize your cutting boards *after* using them to prepare raw foods and *before* using them for ready-to-eat foods.

Q. Is it safe to thaw meat on the counter?

A. No way! The thaw law is simple: Thaw food in the refrigerator (allow 24 hours), or if you're in a hurry, submerge an airtight package in cold water. If you defrost your food in the microwave, make sure you cook it immediately. Always remember to follow the thaw law!

Q. I've heard about cross-contamination of foods. What does that mean?

A. Cross-contamination refers to how bacteria spread from one food to another. This can happen in a variety of ways, but all of them can be prevented. Follow these guidelines to keep from spreading bacteria during food purchasing, storage, and preparation. At the grocery store, always place raw meat, poultry, and seafood in a different area of the shopping cart from other foods. When you get home, place the raw meat, poultry, and seafood on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator to prevent juices from dripping on other foods. During preparation, remember that using one cutting board for raw meat and another for vegetables and other foods is best. If that isn't possible, thoroughly wash your cutting board with hot soapy water after it comes in contact with raw meat, poultry, and seafood. Finally, never save or reuse a marinade that has come in contact with raw meat and always place cooked meat on a clean, unused plate.

Q. How do I know when meat is done? I'll be able to tell by looking at it, right?

A. When it comes to meat, appropriate cooking time is *not* in the eye of the beholder! Using a meat thermometer rather than your senses or even a specific cooking time will ensure that the food is safe to eat and free from harmful bacteria. Beef roasts and steaks should be cooked to at least 145 degrees Fahrenheit (medium rare) and ground beef should be cooked to a minimum of 160 degrees Fahrenheit.

Q. How long can I keep leftover food out before it needs to be refrigerated?

A. Foods should be refrigerated within two hours of preparation. If the food has been left out of the refrigerator for more than two hours, toss it! Also, get in the habit of dating leftovers so they will be eaten within a safe period of time. Generally, left over food will remain safe in the refrigerator (kept at 40 degrees Fahrenheit) for three to five days.