



BASICS OF SAFE FOOD HANDLING

Factsheet | HGIC 3500 | **Reviewed:** Feb 2, 2024

Bacteria that contaminate food and cause foodborne illnesses are everywhere. Follow these four basic safety tips to keep your food safe.

- Wash hands and surfaces often.
- Don't cross-contaminate.
- Keep foods out of the temperature "Danger Zone."
- Cook foods thoroughly.



Keep Hands & Surfaces Clean

Bacteria like *Staphylococci* are found on hair, skin, mouth, nose, and throat. A cough or sneeze can transmit thousands of microorganisms that may cause disease. The best prevention is to keep yourself and your kitchen clean.

Keep Your Hands Clean: Wash your hands! Hands become the most potentially dangerous when seemingly innocent acts like scratching the scalp, running fingers through hair, or touching a pimple become the cause for contaminating foods. Follow the following steps to wash your hands:

1. Wet hands thoroughly with warm water.
2. Apply soap generously.
3. Rub your hands for at least 20 seconds.
4. Scrub under nails with a clean nailbrush.

5. Rinse hands well with warm water.

6. Dry hands using a clean paper towel.

Keep Counters & Equipment Clean: Wash counters and equipment with soap and water immediately after use. Sanitize with a chlorine solution of 1 tablespoon liquid household bleach per gallon of water, especially after contact with raw meats.

Use a bleach solution to sanitize the kitchen drain and dispose of it. Food particles get trapped, and the moist environment is ideal for bacterial growth. Dishes and other utensils should be washed immediately in hot, soapy water, air-dried, or cleaned in an automatic dishwasher.

Bacteria can live in kitchen towels, sponges, and cloths. Wash kitchen towels and cloths regularly and always after using them to clean up raw meat juices, or use paper towels and throw them away. Wash kitchen cloths and towels in the washing machine's hot cycle and dry them in the dryer before reusing them. Sanitize a non-metal kitchen sponge by heating it, while still wet, in a microwave oven for 1 to 1½ minutes. Avoid burns by allowing the sponge to cool before using it.

Keep Cutting Boards Clean: Whether using a wooden or plastic cutting board, keeping it clean and preventing cross-contamination after cutting raw meat, poultry, and seafood is important. Non-porous surfaces are easier to clean than wood. It is best to keep one cutting board for fresh produce and bread and a separate one for raw meats. This will prevent bacteria on a cutting board used for raw meat, poultry, or seafood from contaminating a food that requires no further cooking.

Wash All Cutting Boards Thoroughly: To keep all cutting boards clean, wash them with hot, soapy water after each use, then rinse and air-dry or pat dry with fresh paper towels. An automatic dishwasher can wash non-porous acrylic, plastic, glass, and solid wood boards. Laminated boards may crack and split.

Sanitize Cutting Boards Occasionally: Both wooden and plastic cutting boards can be sanitized with a solution of 1 tablespoon liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water. Flood the surface with the bleach solution and allow it to stand for several minutes, then rinse and air dry or pat dry with fresh paper towels.

Replace Battered Cutting Boards: Even plastic boards wear out over time. Once cutting boards become excessively worn or develop hard-to-clean grooves, they should be discarded.

Prevent Cross-Contamination

Cross-contamination is the transportation of harmful substances to food by:

- Hands that touch raw foods, such as raw meat, then touch food that will not be cooked, like salad ingredients.
- Surfaces or cleaning cloths that touch raw foods need to be cleaned and sanitized, and then touch ready-to-eat food.
- Raw meat, raw poultry, and raw seafood that touch or drip fluids on cooked or ready-to-eat foods.

Keep Foods out of the “Danger Zone”

Safely Store Perishable Foods: Refrigerate or freeze foods that will spoil at room temperature. Keep your refrigerator between 34 °F and 40 °F and your freezer temperature at or below 0 °F. The “Danger Zone” for most foods is between 40 °F and 140 °F. Bacteria grow most rapidly in this range of temperatures, doubling in number in as little as 20 minutes. Discard any perishable food left at room temperature for over two hours. See the “Recommended Times for Refrigerator and Freezer Storage” table for specific storage suggestions.

Safely Thaw Foods: Thaw and marinate foods in the refrigerator, never on the counter. If thawed at room temperature, bacteria can grow in the outer layers of the food before the inside thaws. Proper

thawing is essential to maintaining frozen foods' safety, taste, and texture. It affects the juiciness of meats, the texture and flavor of vegetables and fruits, and the moisture level of baked goods.

- Thick meat cuts should be thawed before cooking to retain juiciness. Cuts such as chops, patties, and steaks prepared by flouring or breading should be thawed before baking.
- Broccoli, cauliflower, and greens are more flavorful if partially thawed before cooking.
- Thawing foods should be placed in a shallow pan to catch drippings so that other refrigerated foods will not be contaminated with raw food juices.
- Never thaw foods at or above room temperature (except breads and other baked goods). Remember, food spoilage bacteria multiply rapidly at temperatures between 40 °F and 140 °F.
- Thaw frozen fruits, vegetables, or meat in the refrigerator overnight in a sealed freezer container. Foods may be thawed more quickly by immersing the sealed freezer container in cold water and changing the water frequently until food is thawed. Foods may also be thawed in the microwave using the defrost setting.
- Food must be cooked immediately after thawing if thawed in the microwave or in cold water in the sink. DO NOT thaw a food and then refrigerate to cook later.
- When you have defrosted food, remember that thawed frozen food is more perishable than fresh food.
- Thawed foods at room temperature for over two hours should be discarded.
- Foods thawed in the refrigerator may be refrozen IF they still contain ice crystals. Immediately remove only the amount needed from the freezer container, remove air, reseal, and return the remaining food to the freezer.
- Thawed meats and poultry kept in the refrigerator should be used within two to three days. Thawed seafood in the refrigerator should be used within one to two days.
- Thaw bread and baked goods at room temperature in sealed freezer containers or original wrapping to avoid moisture loss.

Recommended Times for Refrigerator & Freezer Food Storage

Food	Refrigerator	Freezer
Dairy		
Fresh milk	5-7 days	*
Buttermilk	1-2 weeks	*
Canned Milk (opened)	3-5 days	*
Yogurt, cottage cheese	7 days	*
Hard cheese	6-12 weeks	6-12 months
Cheese spreads	3-4 weeks	*
Ice cream	*	2 months
Eggs		
Fresh in shell	3 weeks	*
Hard-cooked	1 week	*
Meats, Fresh		

Beef roasts, steaks	3-5 days	6-12 month
Ground beef or stew	1-2 days	3-4 months
Pork roast, chops	3-5 days	4-6 months
Sausage	1-2 days	1-2 months
Chicken or turkey	1-2 days	9-12 months
Meats, Cooked		
Smoked Sausage, whole ham (fully cooked)	7 days	1-2 months
Ham slices (fully cooked)	3-4 days	1-2 months
Hotdogs, luncheon meats (unopened)	2 weeks	1-2 months
Hotdogs, luncheon meats (opened)	3-7 days	1-2 months
Leftover meat, cooked	3-4 days	2-3 months
Leftover gravy and meat broth	1-2 days	2-3 months
Leftover poultry, cooked	3-4 days	4-6 months
Seafood		
Fresh lean fish: cod, flounder, trout, haddock, halibut, pollack, perch	1-2 days	4-6 months
Fresh fatty fish: mullet, smelt, salmon, mackerel, bluefish, tuna, swordfish	1-2 days	2-3 months
Live crabs and lobster	same day purchased *	*
Live mussels and clams	2-3 days	*
Live oysters	7-10 days	*
Freshly shucked oysters	5-7 days	3-4 months
Scallops, shrimp, shucked mussels and clams	2-3 days	3-4 months
Fruits & Vegetables (Fresh)		
Apples	1 month	8-12 months
Apricots, avocados, grapes, peaches, pears, plums	3-5 days	8-12 months
Berries, cherries	2-3 days	8-12 months
Grapefruit, lemons, limes, oranges	2 weeks	4-6 months
Pineapple	2-3 days	4-6 months
Beets, carrots	2 weeks	8-12 months
Beans, broccoli, greens, peas, summer squash	3-5 days	8-12 months

Celery, cabbage, chilies, lettuce, peppers, tomatoes	1 week	8-12 months
Mushrooms	1-2 days	8-12 months
Pies		
Chiffon pie, pumpkin pie	1-2 days	1 month
Fruit pie	1-2 days	1 year
* Storage by this method is not recommended due to safety or quality issues.		

Cook Foods Thoroughly

A thermometer is the only reliable way to ensure safety and determine the “doneness” of meat and egg dishes. To be safe, these foods must be cooked to an internal temperature high enough to destroy any harmful bacteria that may have been in the food. The color changes in meat are no longer reliable proof that all bacteria have been destroyed. Use the following minimum internal temperature chart to determine if foods have been cooked thoroughly.

Minimum Internal Temperatures

These temperatures ensure that foodborne bacteria have been destroyed. Consumers may choose to cook meat and poultry to higher temperatures for personal taste or texture preferences.

Minimum Internal Temperatures of Foods

Temperature	Food
145 °F	Fish steaks or fillets. All cuts of beef, lamb, pork and veal. For both safety and quality, allow meat to rest for 4 minutes before carving or eating.
155 °F	Ground, mechanically tenderized or injected meats. Ground fish. Egg dishes.
165 °F	Poultry and wild game. Stuffing and casseroles.

Safely Handle Leftovers

Divide large amounts of hot leftovers directly into small, shallow containers for quick cooling and place them directly in the refrigerator. Discard food that has been left standing at room temperature for more than two hours.

Date leftovers so they can be used within a safe time. Most foods remain safe when refrigerated for three to five days. If you will not be eating the leftovers within that time, freeze them for longer storage. If in doubt, throw it out rather than risk a foodborne illness. Never taste food that looks or smells strange to see if you can still use it. Even a small amount of contaminated food can cause illness.

For more information, request **HGIC 3580, *Cooking Meat Safely***, **HGIC 3587, *Food Thermometers: A Key to Food Safety*** and **HGIC 3495, *Food Safety Mistakes You Do Not Want to Make***.

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