

risk alert



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Each year, about 325,000 people are hospitalized for a foodborne illness. An additional 76 million people are somehow affected by foodborne illnesses, experiencing symptoms such as upset stomach, diarrhea, fever, vomiting, abdominal cramps and dehydration. Food illness is caused by the ingestion of food that is improperly prepared, served or stored. Some people—pregnant women, young children, older adults and people with weakened immune systems—are more susceptible to the dangerous effects of foodborne illness.



Many religious organizations are known to host fun-filled picnics, potluck dinners and congregation get-togethers, where tasty food is sure to be served. In these joyous events, many volunteers lend a hand by bringing a dish, preparing food, serving attendees and cleaning up after the meal. However, if your volunteers aren't aware of proper food safety practices, food illness could set in on those attending the event—leading to a very unpleasant experience for all.

A clean environment keeps harmful bacteria away

Cleaning the cooking and serving area is the first step to preventing a foodborne illness. Everyone handling food needs to wash their hands for 20 seconds in warm, soapy water before and after contact with foodstuffs. Keep countertops and utensils clean throughout the process by washing them with hot, soapy water as necessary.

Defrosting “don’ts”

Defrosting and thawing are always a concern in the kitchen. A few methods of doing so—on the counter or in hot water—should never be used because they allow harmful bacteria to accumulate on the thawed outer layer. It is safe to defrost or thaw food in cold water and the microwave, but your safest bet is using the refrigerator.

The cold water method requires the most attention. If you're defrosting your food this way, make sure it is in leak-proof packaging and change the cold tap water every 30 minutes. When using the microwave method, you'll need to turn the food over about halfway into the thawing. Refrigerator thawing or defrosting will take longer but requires much less attention.

(Over)

Proper preparation ensures safe eating

An important part of keeping foods safe to eat is maintaining separation between the items that need to be cooked and those that do not. For instance, raw meat and poultry should be kept away from fresh fruits and vegetables. Use a different cutting board for both types of food and always store them in separate containers to avoid cross-contamination.

Cooking is also a key concern of food safety, especially when meat or poultry is involved. According to the United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service, one out of every four hamburgers appears cooked before it's actually safe to eat—so going by whether or not it “looks done” isn't reliable. A clean, instant-read meat thermometer should be used to check meat or poultry temperature toward the end of the cooking time but before the food is expected to be done. Place the thermometer in the thickest part of the meat or poultry, avoiding bone, fat and gristle, to check for the appropriate internal temperature:

- 145 degrees Fahrenheit for steaks, roasts and fish
- 160 degrees Fahrenheit for pork, ground beef and egg dishes
- 165 degrees Fahrenheit for chicken breasts and whole poultry

If you're cooking foods in the microwave, stir and rotate the dish periodically while heating to eliminate cold spots that allow bacteria to survive.

Hot foods hot, cold foods cold

The principal rule of serving food is to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. That means hot foods should stay at 140 degrees Fahrenheit or warmer and cold foods should stay at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or cooler. To do this, you can keep cold foods in dishes resting in ice and hot foods on steam tables or warming trays. Another option is to prepare extra serving platters and dishes ahead of time, store them in the refrigerator or oven (preheated to 200 to 250 degrees Fahrenheit) and replace empty platters with the extra ones as necessary. Keep items like desserts and secondary courses in the refrigerator or oven until serving time.

Once the food has been put out, plan on having about two hours before you need to chill it at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit. However, if the food has been in an environment above 90 degrees Fahrenheit, you have about an hour to store the food before bacteria begin to take their toll. Store leftovers in shallow containers to allow them to cool more rapidly.

Help is available when you need it

If you are ever in doubt about your food's safety, the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline is available to answer your questions. Just call (888) 674-6854 or e-mail your question(s) to mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov.

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