

Keep Foods Safe to Prevent Foodborne Illness

By Janet Hackert, Nutrition Specialist

Food safety is not a new topic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “estimate that every year about 76 million people in the United States become ill from harmful bacteria in food; of these, about 5,000 die.” They emphasize, “Foodborne illness is preventable.” So it is worth looking into some tips to keep your food safe.

The basic steps to keeping food safe are clean, separate, cook, and chill.

Clean. Try this experiment: wash your hands just as you always do, but have someone time you while you scrub. Is it a full 20 seconds or more? If not, you may not be getting your hands clean enough. While soap and warm water are also important, it is the abrasion that makes the difference. Food safety expert Ewen Todd of Michigan State University says, “Putting your hands under running water only gets rid of the loose surface contamination.” To remove bacteria and viruses, and the dirt, grease, and surface skin cells they live in, requires scrubbing hands together for 20 seconds, about the time it takes to sing the ABC’s. Use a nail brush to get dirt and germs trapped under nails.

Separate means not cross contaminating foods and surfaces. So use one cutting board for ready-to-eat foods like raw vegetables and fruits and a separate one for raw meats. Or wash the same cutting board between uses. To do this, wash with hot, soapy water or run through a dishwasher. Plastic and wood cutting boards can both be safe, as long as they are in good condition. When the surface of the cutting board is scarred from use, food and microorganisms get trapped in the crevices and cannot be cleaned. That is when it is time to get a new one.

Cook. Many people cook or reheat food with microwave ovens. These use microwaves to heat but they only penetrate the surface of the food, leaving cold spots. According to the Hospitality Institute of Technology and Management’s O. Peter Snyder, “Food two inches apart can be 15 degrees different in temperature.” To better insure that food is cooked, heat foods like casseroles, soups, and stew then stir them and take the temperature of the food. Continue the process until the temperature throughout reaches the recommendations. When cooking prepackaged foods in the microwave, read and follow the manufacturers’ instructions carefully. Make sure the wattage of the microwave is at least as much as what is listed in the instructions. Again, follow directions including stirring and waiting as these help even out temperatures.

Chill leftovers quickly and properly using the rule of two: chill within two hours of removing from the heat source; and use shallow containers (that is, 2 inches deep or less) to refrigerate or freeze cooked foods. Most foods will last up to four days in the refrigerator, except

gravy and stuffing that only last two days. If leftovers cannot be eaten within that time frame, freeze the excess immediately while the quality is still high.

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