

PAGE FOR PATIENTS

A Message from *Preventive Medicine* and Your Physician: Home-Based Food-Borne Illness

Although buying food that is free of disease and contaminants is crucially important, even safe food can become unsafe if not properly handled in your home. Here are some tips to ensure that food remains safe in your home.

1. Cook foods adequately. Cooking food to an internal temperature of at least 160°F (71°C) kills most bacteria and usually protects against food-borne illness. The same rule applies regardless of the cooking method (baking, frying, microwaving, etc.). To be on the safe side, use a meat thermometer to ensure that meat, poultry, and fish have reached a safe internal temperature.

2. Do not leave cooked foods at room temperature for very long. Food should be refrigerated as soon as possible (generally within 2 hours).

3. Keep your refrigerator at 41°F (5°C) or less. Although this will not kill bacteria in food, it will slow down their growth. Measure the temperature in your refrigerator with a thermometer and, if necessary, adjust the temperature control.

4. Date your leftovers so that you can be sure to use them within a safe period of time. In general, leftovers that are stored in the refrigerator can be eaten safely up to 3 to 5 days later.

5. Wash your hands with soap and water before and after preparing food. If you have a cut on your hands, wear rubber or plastic gloves while cooking.

6. Never let raw meat, poultry, or fish

come in contact with other foods. Raw meat, poultry, and fish should be prepared separately from other foods. The preparation area and any utensils used in preparation should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized before using them for other foods to avoid cross-contamination.

7. Cooking surfaces such as countertops and cutting boards should be washed and sanitized after each use. The best way to clean them is with hot water and soap followed by a bleach solution or commercial sanitizing agent.

8. Keep dishcloths and sponges clean and allow them to dry between uses. When wet, they are excellent places for bacteria to grow.

9. Discard food after its expiration date. Routinely go through your refrigerator and cabinets and check the expiration date on all labeled foods.

10. Do not allow dirty dishes to pile up. The food left on dishes is an ideal place for bacteria to multiply.

11. Concentrate on a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, grains, and beans. These types of foods are less likely than foods of animal origin to spread food-borne disease. And they are healthier for you!

12. Wash all fruits and vegetables. This removes not only pesticides but also bacteria.

For more information about food-borne illness, contact the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety at (800) 332-4010.