

Safe Food Handling at Home

SANDY HAGGARD – NUTRITION, FOOD SAFETY, AND HEALTH AGENT

The home is the final stop in the farm-to-table continuum, and safe food handling is the best defense against foodborne illness. To reduce the spread of harmful microorganisms, follow these four key food safety principles:

- Clean – Wash hands and surfaces often.
- Chill – Refrigerate foods promptly.
- Separate – Avoid cross-contamination.
- Cook – Cook foods to proper temperatures.

Safe food handling begins at the grocery store. Because bacteria grow rapidly at warm temperatures, it is important to prevent cold and frozen foods from warming before arriving home. Grocery shopping should be done last when running errands to minimize the time food remains in a warm vehicle, and groceries should be taken directly home so perishable items can be refrigerated or frozen immediately.

During hot weather, cold foods should be packed with ice if the travel time from the store to home exceeds one hour. Raw meat, poultry, fish, and seafood should be placed in plastic bags provided at the meat counter to prevent leaks and kept separate from other foods in the shopping cart. Food condition should also be checked carefully; canned goods with large dents, cracks, or bulges should be avoided, refrigerated foods should feel cold to the touch, and frozen foods should be solid.

Understanding date labels on food can help consumers make informed purchasing decisions. The “Sell By” date indicates the last date a store should sell a product for optimal quality, while “Best By” or “Use By” dates reflect the manufacturer’s estimate of peak quality. These dates are not safety indicators but are meant to guide consumers on freshness and quality.

Proper refrigerated storage is another key step in preventing foodborne illness. To slow bacterial growth, refrigerators should be maintained at 40°F or below and freezers at 0°F for best food quality. An appliance thermometer should be used to regularly monitor temperatures. Raw meat, poultry, fish, and shellfish should be stored on a plate or sealed in a plastic bag on the lowest refrigerator shelf to prevent juices from dripping onto ready-to-eat foods.

Handwashing is one of the most effective ways to prevent foodborne illness. Hands should be washed with hot, soapy water for at least 20 seconds, rinsed thoroughly, and dried. Kitchen towels, sponges, and cloths should be washed and replaced frequently. Cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops should be cleaned with hot, soapy water after food preparation, especially when handling raw meat and poultry. Surfaces can be sanitized with a solution of one tablespoon regular chlorine bleach per one gallon of water, and spray bottles should be clearly labeled “Sanitizer.”

Raw foods must be handled carefully to prevent the spread of harmful bacteria. Meat and poultry should be thawed in the refrigerator, microwave, or under cold running water and cooked immediately after thawing. Acrylic cutting boards may be washed in the dishwasher, but should be replaced once they become rough or deeply grooved. Raw foods should always be marinated in the refrigerator, and marinades should never be reused; they should be discarded after use. Raw meats and their juices must be kept away from other foods, and raw meat, poultry, fish, and

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shellfish should not be washed before cooking, as washing can spread bacteria to nearby surfaces and foods.

Foods should be cooked thoroughly to destroy harmful bacteria. Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, seafood, including oysters, and eggs should be avoided. Meat and poultry should be roasted at oven temperatures of 325°F or higher, and a food thermometer should be used to determine proper doneness. Both dial and digital thermometers are effective tools for ensuring foods reach safe internal temperatures.

Safe food practices should continue during serving. Cross-contamination should be prevented by keeping raw and cooked meats, poultry, fish, and seafood separate. Cooked foods should never be placed on plates that previously held raw meat unless the plate has been thoroughly washed. Foods should be refrigerated promptly and not left out for more than two hours during preparation, serving, or eating. When outdoor temperatures reach 90°F or higher, this time should be limited to one hour. Lunches and picnic foods should be packed with cold packs in insulated containers and kept out of direct sunlight.

Proper handling of leftovers is essential for food safety. Large quantities of leftovers, such as soups or casseroles, should be divided into shallow containers to allow for rapid cooling. For large items like whole poultry, meat should be removed from bones before refrigerating or freezing. All leftovers should be labeled with the date and used within four days when refrigerated. Sauces, soups, and gravies should be reheated to a rolling boil, while other leftovers should be reheated to at least 165°F throughout. When reheating in a microwave, food should be covered, stirred several times, and allowed to stand briefly to eliminate cold spots. Foods that appear old, moldy, or have unusual odors should be discarded without tasting, as harmful bacteria often do not change the taste or smell of food.

Practicing safe food handling at every step—from grocery shopping to storing leftovers—helps reduce the risk of foodborne illness and protects the health of everyone at the table. Simple habits such as proper handwashing, preventing cross-contamination, maintaining correct temperatures, and handling leftovers wisely can make a significant difference. By following these science-based food safety practices, households can confidently prepare and enjoy meals while keeping food safe from farm to table.

For further information on ServSafe Food Handler Certification, or nutrition programming such as Gut Health, Cooking for 1-2, Dining with Diabetes or Planning Family Meals, please contact Sandy Haggard, Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health Agent, Southwind District, SJHaggard@ksu.edu or 620.365.2242.

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