Food Safety 101: Four Essential Practices for Safe Food at Home

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Every year, millions of people get sick from foodborne illnesses—many of which are preventable with safe food handling practices. Whether you're preparing a weeknight dinner or packing lunch for the next day, following a few basic food safety steps can help keep you and your family healthy. This article outlines four essential strategies, which include clean, separate, cook, and chill. Applying these strategies can help you to reduce your risk of foodborne illness when cooking at home.

Food Safety Practice #1: CLEAN

CLEAN the counters

When it comes to preparing food at home, we want to ensure that we start with a clean kitchen. Take time to clean any surfaces that you'll be cooking on. It is recommended to clean your counters before and after prepping food in the kitchen. You can use warm soapy water or a sanitizer spray to clean off your counters.

CLEAN our hands

You'll also want to wash your hands before you begin cooking. You might be thinking, "why do I need to wash my hands? I'm just cooking for myself and my family, we all have the same germs." We can bring many types of germs (bacteria, viruses, parasites, etc.) home with us from school, work, and other public places. If we don't wash our hands, those germs could get into our food and could cause us or our families to be sick.

Whether you are preparing a meal or making a quick snack, it is best to wash your hands before working with the food. The recommendation is to wash your hands for 20 seconds with warm soapy water. Wash your hands after handling raw meats, before prepping other foods.

CLEAN our kitchen utensils

Just like the counters and our hands, the kitchen utensils must be properly cleaned before prepping a meal or snack. Check to ensure that any kitchen utensils or equipment is clean before using. Wash items in hot, soapy water after each use.

CLEAN the produce

Wash your vegetables and fruits. You can rinse them under running water and if needed, you can clean the skins of produce with a vegetable brush. This is an important practice even if you aren't eating the skins of fruits or vegetables. For example, because we don't eat the peel of an orange or the rind of the watermelon, we might not think of washing an orange or watermelon before cutting. If you don't wash the skin when you cut the produce item, it could introduce bacteria onto the flesh of the fruit or vegetable. The best thing you can do is to get into the habit of washing all fruits or vegetables before using them.

Food Safety Practice #2: SEPERATE

Raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs can carry harmful bacteria that spread to other foods if not handled properly. Keeping these foods separate from ready-to-eat items helps prevent cross-contamination. Some tips for keeping food separated include:

- Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs in a separate spot in your grocery cart, in different grocery bags, and a separate spot in your fridge.
- Wash your hands after handling raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs.
- Prepare raw ingredients, especially meats, on a different counter or work area than other foods.
- Use separate cutting boards and knives for raw meats and other foods. If that's not possible, prepare all produce and ready-to-eat foods first, then prepare the raw meats.
- After using knives, cutting boards, or other tools with raw meat, wash them thoroughly with warm, soapy water before using them again.
- If you're marinating raw meat, do not reuse the marinade on other raw foods unless you bring it to a boil first.
- Never place cooked food on a plate, bowl, or surface that previously held raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs.

Food Safety Practice #3: COOK

Cooking food to the proper temperature is essential for killing harmful bacteria and other pathogens.

The Temperature Danger Zone

Bacteria grow quickly between 40°F and 140°F. This range is called the "Temperature Danger Zone." Keeping food out of this zone—either by cooking it properly or keeping it cold—reduces the risk of foodborne illness.

When cooking animal products (beef, pork, chicken, fish, etc) it is important to cook food to a safe internal temperature before eating the food. If the food is undercooked there is an increased chance that there are still harmful bacteria in the food that could increase you risk of developing a food borne illness.

What is the best way to know if the food is at a safe internal temperature?

Some people guess whether food is done by checking its color or texture, but this isn't always accurate. The safest way to make sure food has reached a safe temperature is to use a food thermometer. A thermometer gives you an exact reading and helps you know whether to keep cooking the food or if it's ready to eat. Refer to Table #1 on the safe internal temperature for a variety of different animal products.

Table 1. Safe Internal Temperatures for Animal Products.

Food	Recommended Internal Temperature (Fahrenheit)
Beef, Pork, Veal, Lamb Steaks, Chops, and Roasts	145 degrees F and allow to rest for at least 3 minutes
Ham, fresh or smoked (uncooked)	145 degrees F and allow to rest for at least 3 minutes
Ham, fully cooked (reheating)	Reheat cooked hams packaged in USDA-inspected plants to 140 degrees F and all other to 165 degrees F
Fish and Shellfish	145 degrees F
Ground meats	160 degrees F
Eggs	160 degrees F
Ground Poultry	165 degrees F
All Poultry	165 degrees F
Leftovers	165 degrees F
Casseroles	165 degrees F

When checking temperature, insert the thermometer into the thickest part of the meat. If the thickest part has reached a safe temperature, the smaller pieces should be safe too. You can check multiple spots if needed.

When reheating cooked food that has been kept in the fridge or freezer, you want leftovers to reach 165 degrees F.

Food Safety Practice #4: CHILL

Just like proper cooking is important, keeping food cold is equally necessary to prevent the growth of bacteria.

Don't Leave Food Out Too Long

Perishable food should not be left out for more than two hours. If the temperature is 90°F or hotter (like at a picnic or during summer), that time drops to just one hour. Bacteria multiply quickly in the Temperature Danger Zone, so it's best to chill food quickly and properly.

Set Your Fridge and Freezer to the Right Temperature

Your refrigerator should be at or below 40°F, and your freezer should be at or below 0°F. These temperatures help prevent bacteria from growing and keep your food fresh longer. Some refrigerators and freezers have a built-in thermometer, but if they do not it is recommended to buy a thermometer for your refrigerator and freezer. This will help you to know the current temperatures are of your refrigerator and freezer.

Thawing Food Safely

Never thaw food on the kitchen counter at room temperature. Even frozen food can fall into the danger zone as it thaws, allowing bacteria to multiply.

Here are three safe ways to thaw frozen food:

1. In the refrigerator: This method is the safest but takes time. Plan for at least 24 hours of thawing for every 5 pounds of food. For example, a 20-pound turkey would take about four days to thaw in the fridge.
2. In cold water: Place the food in a leak-proof bag and submerge it in cold water. Change the water every 30 minutes to keep it cold.
3. In the microwave: Use the microwave's defrost setting. Check your appliance's manual for specific instructions.

Know How Long Food Can Be Stored in the Fridge

Even in the refrigerator, food can spoil if it's left too long. See Table 2 for the lists of safe storage times for common foods:

Table 2. Safe Recommended Times for Fridge Storage.

Category	Food Examples	Refrigerator Storage Time (40 degrees F or below)
Salads	Egg, chicken, ham, tuna, macaroni	3-5 days
Hot Dogs	Opened package	1 week
Unopened package	2 weeks	
Deli Meats	Opened package	3-5 days
Unopened package	2 weeks	
Bacon	Bacon	7 days
Sausage	Sausage	1-2 days
Ground Meat	Ground beef, turkey, veal, pork, lamb	1-2 days
Fresh Meat	Steak, chops, roasts	3-5 days
Fresh Poultry	Chicken or turkey	1-2 days
Soups and Stews	Vegetables or meat added	3-4 days
Leftovers	Any leftovers	3-4 days

Conclusion

Practicing food safety at home is one of the best ways to protect yourself and your family from foodborne illnesses. By following the four core principles, clean, separate, cook, and chill, you can greatly reduce your risk. These practices help eliminate harmful bacteria, prevent cross-contamination, ensure your food is cooked safely, and keep leftovers fresh and safe to eat. Making food safety a regular part of your cooking routine leads to healthier meals and peace of mind.

References

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