

# Food Safety for Older Adults: Why Food Safety Matters More As You Age

Food safety is important for everyone, but some groups, such as older adults, are at a higher risk of getting sick from foodborne illnesses. Adults aged 65 and older are more likely to develop severe symptoms, be hospitalized, or even die from a foodborne illness. That's why understanding and practicing safe food handling is especially important for this age group.

## A Real-Life Example:

One summer evening, a family gathered for dinner. They enjoyed a delicious meal and good conversation. But by the next morning, the grandmother felt nauseated. Later that day, the grandfather and two other older family members also experienced vomiting and stomach discomfort. All four were 65 or older. None of the younger family members had any symptoms.

The cause? The meat used in the main dish had been left in a hot car too long after grocery shopping. This simple mistake led to bacterial growth that made several family members sick, highlighting how critical proper food handling is, especially for older adults.

## Why are older adults more vulnerable to foodborne illnesses?

Older adults face a greater risk of foodborne illness due to three main reasons:

1. Weakened Immune System
  - The immune system defends our body against any bacteria, viruses, parasites found in food that could cause us to get sick. Unfortunately, as we age our immune system weakens. When we have a weakened immune system our bodies ability to fight off infection is lowered. This decline often begins around age 50–60 and continues with age, significantly increasing the risk of illness by age 75.

2. Slower Digestive System
  - Aging slows digestion, which means food stays in the system longer. At the same time, stomach acid production decreases. These changes allow harmful bacteria more time and opportunity to grow and cause illness.
3. Decreased Organ Function
  - The liver and kidneys play key roles in filtering out toxins and harmful bacteria. As these organs age, they may not function as efficiently, making it harder for the body to get rid of foodborne pathogens.

## How can I practice good food safety at home?

Four basic strategies to implement to practice good food safety in the home include clean, separate, cook, and chill. These principles help prevent the spread of bacteria and keep your food safe. Let's explore a few tips on how to implement each of these strategies.

1. Clean
  - Wash your hands with warm, soapy water for 20 seconds before and after handling food.
  - Clean countertops, kitchen tools, and cutting boards before and after food prep.
  - Rinse all fruits and vegetables under running water, even if you don't eat the skin.
2. Separate
  - Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs separate from ready-to-eat foods.
  - Use different cutting boards and utensils for raw meat and other ingredients.
  - Store raw foods in sealed containers away from cooked items in the fridge.
3. Cook
  - Use a food thermometer to ensure foods are cooked to safe internal temperatures.
  - Don't rely on appearance alone, color and texture aren't always accurate indicators.
  - Avoid the "Temperature Danger Zone" (40°F to 140°F), where bacteria grow quickly.

#### 4. Chill

- Refrigerate perishable foods promptly and keep your fridge at or below 40°F.
- Freeze leftovers if you won't eat them within 3–4 days.
- Thaw frozen food safely in the refrigerator, cold water, or microwave, never on the counter.

If you want to learn more about the four principles of practicing food safety at home, you can read the article, [Food Safety 101: Four Essential Practices for Safe food at Home](#).

## Additional Food Safety Tips for Older Adults

- Shop smart: Choose cold and frozen foods last at the grocery store to keep them cold until you get home.
- Store leftovers safely: Refrigerate leftovers within two hours and eat them within 3–4 days, or freeze for longer storage.
- Reheat properly: Always heat leftovers to 165°F, using a food thermometer to check.
- Stay informed: Visit trusted websites like [www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov) for food recall updates and safety alerts.

## Conclusion

Older adults are more vulnerable to foodborne illness due to natural changes in immunity, digestion, and organ function. But by following the four food safety principles of clean, separate, cook, and chill, and take extra precautions, you can lower your risk and enjoy meals safely. Safe food handling is a simple but powerful way to protect your health and well-being as you age.

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