
Food Safety Facts



Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Basics for Handling Food Safely

Information for Consumers

April 2003

Safe steps in food handling, cooking, and storage are essential to prevent foodborne illness. You can't see, smell, or taste harmful bacteria that may cause illness. In every step of food preparation, follow the four Fight BAC!™ guidelines to keep food safe:

- **Clean** -- Wash hands and surfaces often.
- **Separate** -- Don't cross-contaminate.
- **Cook** -- Cook to proper temperatures.
- **Chill** -- Refrigerate promptly.

Shopping

- Purchase refrigerated or frozen items after selecting your non-perishables.
- Never choose meat or poultry in packaging that is torn or leaking.
- Do not buy food past "Sell-By," "Use-By," or other expiration dates.
- Put raw meat and poultry into a plastic bag so meat juices will not cross-contaminate ready-to-eat food or food that is eaten raw, such as vegetables or fruit.
- Plan to drive directly home from the grocery store. You may want to take a cooler with ice for the perishables.

Storage

- Always refrigerate perishable food within 2 hours. Refrigerate within 1 hour when the temperature is above 90 °F.
- Check the temperature of your refrigerator and freezer with an appliance thermometer. The refrigerator should be at 40 °F or below and the freezer at 0 °F or below.
- Cook or freeze fresh poultry, fish, ground meats, and variety meats within 2 days; other beef, veal, lamb, or pork, within 3 to 5 days.
- Perishable food such as meat and poultry should be wrapped securely to maintain quality and to prevent meat juices from getting onto other food.

- To maintain quality when freezing meat and poultry in its original package, wrap the package again with foil or plastic wrap that is recommended for the freezer.
- In general, high-acid canned food such as tomatoes, grapefruit, and pineapple can be stored on the shelf for 12 to 18 months. Low-acid canned food such as meat, poultry, fish, and most vegetables will keep 2 to 5 years -- if the can remains in good condition and has been stored in a cool, clean, and dry place. Discard cans that are dented, leaking, bulging, or rusted.

Preparation

- Always wash hands before and after handling food.
- Don't cross-contaminate. Keep raw meat, poultry, fish, and their juices away from other food. After cutting raw meats, wash hands, cutting board, knife, and countertops with hot, soapy water.
- Marinate meat and poultry in a covered dish in the refrigerator.
- Sanitize cutting boards by using a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach in 1 quart of water.

Thawing

- **Refrigerator:** The refrigerator allows slow, safe thawing. Make sure thawing meat and poultry juices do not drip onto other food.
- **Cold Water:** For faster thawing, place food in a leak-proof plastic bag. Submerge in cold tap water. Change the

water every 30 minutes. Cook immediately after thawing.

- **Microwave:** Cook meat and poultry immediately after microwave thawing.

Cooking

- Cook ground meats to 160 °F; ground poultry to 165 °F.
- Beef, veal, and lamb steaks, roasts, and chops may be cooked to 145 °F; all cuts of fresh pork, 160 °F.
- Whole poultry should reach 180 °F in the thigh; breasts, 170 °F.

Serving

- Hot food should be held at 140 °F or warmer.
- Cold food should be held at 40 °F or colder.
- When serving food at a buffet, keep food hot with chafing dishes, slow cookers, and warming trays. Keep food cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice or use small serving trays and replace them often.
- Perishable food should not be left out more than 2 hours at room temperature (1 hour when the temperature is above 90 °F).

Leftovers

- Discard any food left out at room temperature for more than 2 hours (1 hour if the temperature was above 90 °F).

- Place food into shallow containers and immediately put in the refrigerator or freezer for rapid cooling.
- Use cooked leftovers within 4 days.

Refreezing

Meat and poultry defrosted in the refrigerator may be refrozen before or after cooking. If thawed by other methods, cook before refreezing.

Cold Storage Chart

These short, but safe, time limits will help keep refrigerated food from spoiling or becoming dangerous to eat. Because freezing keeps food safe indefinitely, recommended storage times are for quality only.

Product	Refrigerator (40 °F)	Freezer (0 °F)
Eggs		
Fresh, in shell	3 to 5 weeks	Do not freeze
Raw yolks & whites	2 to 4 days	1 year
Hard cooked	1 week	Does not freeze well
Liquid pasteurized eggs, egg substitutes opened unopened	3 days 10 days	Does not freeze well 1 year
Mayonnaise Commercial, refrigerate after opening	2 months	Do not freeze
Frozen Dinners & Entrees Keep frozen until ready to heat	--	3 to 4 months
Deli & Vacuum-Packed Products		
Store-prepared (or homemade) egg, chicken, ham, tuna, & macaroni salads	3 to 5 days	Does not freeze well
Hot dogs & Luncheon Meats		
Hot dogs opened package unopened package	1 week 2 weeks	1 to 2 months 1 to 2 months
Luncheon meats opened package unopened package	3 to 5 days 2 weeks	1 to 2 months 1 to 2 months

Bacon & Sausage		
Bacon	7 days	1 month
Sausage, raw -- from chicken, turkey, pork, beef	1 to 2 days	1 to 2 months
Smoked breakfast links, patties	7 days	1 to 2 months
Hard sausage -- pepperoni, jerky sticks	2 to 3 weeks	1 to 2 months
Summer sausage -- labeled "Keep Refrigerated" opened unopened	3 weeks 3 months	1 to 2 months 1 to 2 months
Ham, Corned Beef		
Corned beef, in pouch with pickling juices	5 to 7 days	Drained, 1 month
Ham, canned -- labeled "Keep Refrigerated" opened unopened	3 to 5 days 6 to 9 months	1 to 2 months Do not freeze
Ham, fully cooked vacuum sealed at plant, undated, unopened	2 weeks	1 to 2 months
Ham, fully cooked vacuum sealed at plant, dated, unopened	"Use-By" date on package	1 to 2 months
Ham, fully cooked whole half slices	7 days 3 to 5 days 3 to 4 days	1 to 2 months 1 to 2 months 1 to 2 months
Hamburger, Ground & Stew Meat		
Hamburger & stew meat	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Ground turkey, veal, pork, lamb, & mixtures of them	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Fresh Beef, Veal, Lamb, Pork		
Steaks	3 to 5 days	6 to 12 months
Chops	3 to 5 days	4 to 6 months
Roasts	3 to 5 days	4 to 12 months
Variety meats -- tongue, liver, heart, kidneys, chitterlings	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Pre-stuffed, uncooked pork chops, lamb chops, or chicken breasts stuffed with dressing	1 day	Does not freeze well

Soups & Stews Vegetable or meat added	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 months
Cooked Meat Leftovers		
Cooked meat & meat casseroles	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 months
Gravy & meat broth	1 to 2 days	2 to 3 months
Fresh Poultry		
Chicken or turkey, whole	1 to 2 days	1 year
Chicken or turkey, pieces	1 to 2 days	9 months
Giblets	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Cooked Poultry Leftovers		
Fried chicken	3 to 4 days	4 months
Cooked poultry casseroles	3 to 4 days	4 to 6 months
Pieces, plain	3 to 4 days	4 months
Pieces covered with broth, gravy	1 to 2 days	6 months
Chicken nuggets, patties	1 to 2 days	1 to 3 months
Pizza , cooked	3 to 4 days	1 to 2 months
Stuffing , cooked	3 to 4 days	1 month

For further information, contact:

USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline:

1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854); 1-800-256-7072 (TTY)

E-mail: mpholine.fsis.usda.gov

FSIS Web site: www.fsis.usda.gov

"The USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer."