

Reducing Your Risk of Foodborne Illness at Home

Extension Nutrition and
Food Science Program

Foodborne illness strikes an estimated one of every four people in the United States each year. The symptoms can be so much like the flu that people may not realize that their sickness is caused by something they ate.

Most foodborne illnesses are caused by bacteria that either were present on the food or were transferred to the food from other sources, such as a person's hands or dirty countertops, utensils, or cutting boards. If you leave foods out at room temperature too long, you and your family are likely to get a foodborne illness.

The symptoms of foodborne illness can appear within hours or days of eating contaminated food. They include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, abdominal cramps, and headache.

Everyone can be affected by foodborne illness. But the people who are most susceptible are infants, young children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with special health conditions or a weakened immune system.

Below are ways that you and your family can reduce the chances of getting a foodborne illness:

- Buy food from reliable sources. Check the food label for “use by,” “sell by,” and expiration dates to make sure the food you buy is as fresh as possible. When you buy packaged foods, choose only those in packages that are clean and have no holes or tears. Canned foods should not be dented, rusty, or bulging.
- When you buy perishable foods—such as meat, fresh produce, and refrigerated and frozen foods—bring them home quickly, and store them correctly. If you can't get from the store to your home within 30 minutes, place them in a cooler in the back (not the trunk) of your vehicle.
- Use an appliance thermometer to make sure your refrigerator and freezer are at the right temperatures. Refrigerators should be kept at 40 degrees F or below; freezers should be 0 degrees F or below.
- Thaw foods safely. The best way to thaw food is in the refrigerator. Although you can use a microwave oven, this will partially cook the food. If you thaw food in the microwave, cook it immediately.
- Keep all work surfaces and cutting boards clean. Wash them with hot, soapy water and sanitize them after each use. You can make your own sanitizing solution by mixing 1 teaspoon of bleach with 1 quart of water. Let the solution come into contact with the work surface or cutting board for 2 minutes; then wipe it with a paper towel and let it air dry.

- As many as one-half of all foodborne illnesses could be prevented if people washed their hands. Wash your hands before and while preparing food, especially if you touch raw meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood. Also wash your hands after sneezing, coughing, using the bathroom, changing a diaper, or touching a pet.
- Wash fresh fruits and vegetables under cold running water to remove any dirt. This will also reduce the number of bacteria on them. To clean the types of produce that have a firm surface, such as carrots, potatoes, or melons, scrub them with a clean vegetable brush.
- Cook food to a safe internal temperature. The only way to tell if food has been cooked enough is to use a food thermometer. The recommended minimum temperatures are listed below:
 - ▶ Beef, veal, and lamb steaks, roasts, and chops: 145 degrees F
 - ▶ Pork (all cuts): 160 degrees F
 - ▶ Ground beef, veal and lamb: 160 degrees F
 - ▶ Poultry (whole, ground, or parts): 165 degrees F
- Keep hot, cooked foods at 140 degrees F or above.
- Refrigerate or freeze leftovers as soon as possible. Place cooked foods in several small, shallow, covered containers so they cool quickly. Reheat them to 165 degrees F.
- If you are not sure a food is safe, throw it out. It is always better to be safe than sick.

Produced by AgriLife Communications, The Texas A&M System
Extension publications can be found on the Web at: <http://AgriLifebookstore.org>

Visit the Texas AgriLife Extension Service at <http://AgriLifeextension.tamu.edu>

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work in Agriculture and Home Economics, Acts of Congress of May 8, 1914, as amended, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Edward G. Smith, Director, Texas AgriLife Extension Service, The Texas A&M System.
Revision