



Food Safety Information

Foodborne Illness Peaks in Summer – What can you do to prevent it?

Year after year we hear and read the same advice: “Handle food carefully in the summer because foodborne illness, also known as “food poisoning,” is more prevalent in warmer weather.” But does foodborne illness really increase during the summer months? If so, how can it be prevented?

Yes, foodborne illnesses increase during the summer, and the reason why is twofold: bacteria multiply faster in warmer temperatures, and preparing food outdoors makes safe food handling more difficult.

Natural Causes

Bacteria can be found everywhere. They are present throughout the environment in soil, air, water, in and on the bodies of people and animals, and in food. Most foods naturally provide the moisture and nutrients needed for bacteria to flourish. Foodborne bacteria grow fastest at temperatures between 90 to 110 °F (32 to 43 °C) and during the summer months, the warmer temperatures and higher humidity are ideal for bacterial growth.

Cooking Outdoors

During the summer months, more people are cooking outdoors at picnics, barbecues and on camping trips. The safety controls that an indoor kitchen provides such as thermostat-controlled cooking, refrigeration and convenient washing facilities are usually not available.

Consumers can play a role in protecting themselves by following these four simple steps to food safety during the summer: CLEAN, SEPARATE, COOK and CHILL.

Clean: Wash hands and surfaces often

Unwashed or improperly washed hands and surfaces can quickly spread germs and cause foodborne illness.

- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with warm, soapy water before and after handling food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and handling pets.

- When eating away from home, find out if there's a source of potable (safe drinking) water. If not, bring water for preparation and cleaning or pack clean, wet, disposable washcloths, moist towelettes and paper towels for cleaning hands and surfaces.

Separate: Don't cross contaminate

Improper handling of food, kitchen tools and surfaces can cause microorganisms to transfer from raw to cooked food. Cross-contamination during preparation, grilling, and serving food is a prime cause of foodborne illness.

- When packing the cooler for an outing, wrap raw meats, poultry and fish securely and separately to keep their juices away from other food.
- Never place cooked food on the same plate that previously held raw food unless the plate has first been washed in hot, soapy water.

Cook: Proper temperatures prevent foodborne illness

Food safety experts agree that food is safely cooked when it is heated for a long enough time and at a high enough temperature to kill harmful bacteria that cause foodborne illness. Using a food thermometer is the only way to ensure the safety of meat, poultry, seafood and egg products.

- Take your thermometer along. Meat and poultry cooked on a grill often browns very fast on the outside, so be sure they are cooked thoroughly. Check them with a food thermometer.



Foodborne Illness Peaks in the Summer

- Cook meat and poultry completely at the picnic site. Partial cooking of food ahead of time allows bacteria to survive and multiply to the point that subsequent cooking cannot destroy them.
- Cook all raw meats and poultry to these recommended safe internal temperatures:

| Safe Minimum Internal Temperature | |
|--|----------------|
| Poultry (whole, pieces & ground): | 165 °F / 74 °C |
| Ground meats: | 160 °F / 71 °C |
| Beef, pork, lamb and veal (steaks, roasts & chops): | 145 °F / 63 °C |

Chill: Refrigerate promptly and keep cold food cold

Keeping food at an unsafe temperature can cause bacteria to grow to dangerous levels that can cause illness.

- Cold refrigerated perishable foods like luncheon meats, cooked meats, chicken, and potato or pasta salads should be kept in an insulated cooler packed with several inches of ice, ice packs or containers of frozen water.
- Consider packing canned beverages in one cooler and perishable food in another cooler because the beverage cooler may be opened frequently causing the temperature inside of the cooler to fluctuate and become unsafe.
- While driving, keep the cooler in the coolest part of the car. Once outside, place it in the shade or out of the sun, whenever possible.

- Preserve the cold temperature of the cooler by replenishing the ice as soon as it starts to melt.
- If a cooler is not an option, consider taking foods that do not require refrigeration such as whole fruits, whole vegetables, hard cheeses, canned or dried meats.
- Take-out food: If you don't plan to eat take-out food within two hours of purchase, plan ahead and chill the food in your refrigerator before packing for your outing.

Leftovers?

Food left out of refrigeration for more than two hours may not be safe to eat. When the temperature is above 90 °F (32 °C), food should not be left out for more than one hour. Play it safe and put leftover perishables back on ice once you finish eating so they do not spoil or become unsafe to eat. If you have any doubts, throw it out!

Call the **USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline** toll free at
1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)

The hotline is open year-round and can be reached from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Eastern Time) Monday through Friday. Available in English and Spanish.



Food Safety Questions?

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline@usda.gov

Consumers with food safety questions can also "Ask Karen," the FSIS virtual representative. Available 24/7 at [AskKaren.gov](https://www.fsis.usda.gov/askkaren).



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