

Chapter 9

FOOD SAFETY

What is a food-borne illness?

How can I help prevent food-borne illness?

How do I keep food safe in a power failure?





CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

Health Canada estimates that there are 11 to 13 million cases of food-borne illness in Canada every year.

You may get a food-borne illness without even realizing it. You may think you have a stomach bug or a touch of flu, nothing terribly important. But food-borne illness can be very serious, even deadly, especially for seniors.

Everyone is different, but if you are like most people, your immune system will grow weaker with age and you will not be as good at fighting illnesses as you used to be. You may have less stomach acid, which helps to keep the bacteria in your intestines under control. You may also already have a chronic illness, such as diabetes, cancer or kidney disease, which makes you even more vulnerable to spoiled food.

What is a food-borne illness?

A food-borne illness occurs when a person eats food infected with tiny disease-causing organisms, such as bacteria, viruses and parasites.

The most common symptoms of a food-borne illness are stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches and/or fever. These symptoms usually occur within a few hours after eating contaminated food and usually last only a day or two. But in some cases, symptoms may take several days to appear and may last as long as a week to 10 days.

Meat, chicken and turkey, seafood, eggs, vegetables and fruit, milk and milk products may all carry the germs responsible for food-borne illnesses. When you handle these foods, you may also transfer the germs to other foods, as well as to your kitchen counters, cutting boards or utensils.



CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

How can I prevent food-borne illness?

As you age, your immune system weakens, which means you should avoid foods that carry a higher risk of contamination.

These include:

- unpasteurized cheeses (feta, Brie and Camembert)
- raw or unpasteurized cow or goat milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk
- raw fish
- raw shellfish (oysters, clams, mussels and scallops)
- raw or under-cooked meat, chicken or turkey
- raw sprouts
- unpasteurized or freshly pressed fruit juice or cider, usually sold at roadside stands or juice bars, and
- raw or lightly cooked eggs, including uncooked cake or cookie batter (no licking the spoon!), salad dressings and sauces made with eggs.

At the grocery store:

Pick up all foods that must be refrigerated or frozen last, just before you go to the checkout counter.

Keep raw meat, seafood and poultry well wrapped and away from other items in your grocery cart (they can drip onto other foods). Ask the checkout clerk to put them in a separate bag.

Read the “best before” dates on food items and make sure you will have enough time to eat what you buy. For example, do not buy a big container of yogurt that expires in two days, if you don’t think you will be able to eat it all in that time. And remember: throw out all food items after they expire, even canned and packaged food.

As soon as you get home

Refrigerate or freeze:

- perishable foods (foods with a limited shelf life, such as milk and other dairy products, vegetables, meat and poultry)
- prepared foods that say “keep refrigerated” or “keep frozen” on the package, and
- restaurant leftovers.

Place raw meat, seafood and poultry in a drawer or container on the bottom shelf of your refrigerator so they won't they drip onto other foods.

Before handling food

Wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and warm water. Regular soap is fine; you do not have to use an anti-bacterial soap. Dry your hands with a clean hand towel or paper towel.

After handling food

Wash everything – your hands, your cutting board, bowls, utensils and counter tops – with soap and warm water before you go on to the next food. This will prevent the transfer of germs from one food to another. For example, once you cut the skin off the raw chicken, wash everything before you chop the broccoli.

Food safety tips

- Keep two cutting boards (wood or plastic). Use one for raw meat, poultry and seafood and the other for washed vegetables and fruit and other ready-to-eat food, such as cheese. Mark each one so that you know which board is for which purpose.
- Replace your cutting boards as soon as they become worn or develop hard-to-clean grooves.
- Sanitize your wooden cutting boards every time you cut raw meat or at least once a week with a bleach solution. Use one tsp (5 mL) of household bleach to three cups (750 mL) of water. Flood your board with the mixture. Let it stand a few minutes, then rinse thoroughly with clean water.
- Use the hot cycle to wash your dishcloths. Wash them often. Consider using paper towels to clean up kitchen surfaces.
- It is not always possible to tell when food is no longer safe: it may not look, smell or taste bad. When in doubt, throw it out.



CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

If you are using a marinade on meat or vegetables for extra flavour, marinate the food in the refrigerator, not on the counter at room temperature.

Before cooking or serving vegetables and fruit

Wash all vegetables and fruit under clean running water (the water must be safe enough to drink), even those with a hard rind that you do not eat, like oranges, melons and squash. You may transfer bacteria from the outer skin to the inner flesh when you cut or peel them.

Do not use detergent or bleach to wash fruit and vegetables. These cleaners can be absorbed into your food. Clean running water is enough.

In addition:

- Use a vegetable scrub brush on vegetables and fruit that have a firm skin, such as carrots, potatoes, melons and squash.
- Throw away the outer leaves of leafy vegetables before you wash the rest. Make sure all dirt is gone.

Storing uneaten or unused food

At room temperature, bacteria in food can double every 20 minutes. Refrigerate or freeze all perishable or leftover food within two hours.

Never put very hot food, such as soup, stew or pasta sauce, directly from the stove into the refrigerator. Instead, let your dish cool at room temperature for about 30 minutes and then transfer it to a shallow, covered container and place it in the refrigerator. (Use several shallow containers, if necessary – they cool more quickly than deep containers.) Today's refrigerators

Watch out!

The danger zone for germs is between 40°F (4°C) and 140°F (60°C):

- Hot food should be hotter than 140°F (60°C).
- Cold food should be colder than 40°F (4°C).

can handle warm food better than older ones – so don't be afraid of putting dishes that are still a bit warm into your fridge!

Throw out any perishable or leftover food that has been sitting at room temperature for longer than two hours. If your hard cheese becomes mouldy on the outside, carefully cut off the mould and 1 inch (2.5 cm) away from the mould. Cutting off just the mould is not enough! And, use the cheese as soon as possible.

Set your refrigerator at 40°F (4°C) or colder and your freezer at 0°F (-18°C). Use an appliance thermometer, available at any grocery or hardware store, to make sure your refrigerator and freezer are cold enough.

Store eggs in their original carton, even if you have an egg tray in your refrigerator. Trays, especially in the door, are often not cold enough.

Leave some room for cold air to circulate: don't pack your refrigerator too tightly with food.

Thawing food from the freezer

Do not thaw frozen food on the counter, at room temperature. The outside can thaw first, while the inside remains frozen, creating a breeding ground for bacteria. Frozen foods should be thawed either:

Watch out!

Do not put plastic containers, such as margarine tubs, in the microwave. As the container heats, some unhealthy chemicals can transfer into your food. Use containers labeled "microwave safe" only.



CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

- In the refrigerator. It will usually take about five hours to thaw one pound (500 grams) of meat or poultry.
- In a microwave. Follow your microwave's directions for thawing food and cook the food immediately after you have thawed it. Never microwave plastic wrap or foam containers.
- Under cold water. Keep the food in its original wrapping or container and change the water every half hour to make sure it stays cold.

Dealing with leftovers

Have you ever pulled out a container from your fridge or freezer and wondered what on earth's inside? Put a label on the containers you put leftovers in, with both the date and the name of the dish.

Eat refrigerated leftovers as soon as possible, preferably within three days.

Reheat leftovers once only. Throw out what's left.

Cooking food

Heat food thoroughly to at least 140°F (60°C). Leftovers should be heated to an even higher temperature, at least 165°F (74°C).

Use a food thermometer – available at any grocery or hardware store – to make sure your cooked food really is cooked. A digital thermometer is easiest to read.

If you are using a microwave, first cover the dish then stir and rotate it at least once during cooking to make sure there are no cold spots where germs can survive.

How do I keep food safe during a power failure?

Two hours is the safety margin. If your power is out for less than two hours, the food in your refrigerator or freezer will be fine, provided your refrigerator and freezer are set properly. Make sure your refrigerator is set at 40°F (4°C) or colder and your freezer at 0°F (-18°C). Appliance thermometers are available at all grocery and hardware stores.

Food in a full chest or upright freezer will last even longer, about 24 hours for a half-full freezer and 48 hours for a full freezer.

Once the power goes out, open your fridge and freezer doors as seldom as possible. If the power stays out more than two hours or the temperature in your fridge is higher than 40°F (4°C), throw out all perishable food, such as meat, fish, poultry, milk, eggs and leftovers. If you are in the middle of cooking at the time of the power failure, throw out all the partially cooked food.

Healthy Eating

QUIZ # 8

short answer

1. How many cutting boards should you have?

TWO: one for raw meat, poultry and seafood, and the other for everything else.

2. How long should you wash your hands in warm soapy water before and after handling food?

20 SECONDS.

3. Do you need to use detergent or bleach to clean fresh vegetables and fruit?

NO. Plain water is all you need.

4. How soon should you put leftovers in the refrigerator or freezer?

WITHIN TWO HOURS. After more than two hours, throw it out!