



How to ensure food safety: Tips and best practices for consumers

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INTRODUCTION

Ensuring food safety is paramount for maintaining good health and preventing foodborne illnesses. Whether you're cooking at home, dining out, or grocery shopping, following proper food safety practices is essential. In this article, we'll explore some valuable tips and best practices that consumers can implement to safeguard themselves and their families from foodborne hazards. (Al-Sakkaf A et al., 2015 & Bai L et al., 2018).

One of the simplest yet most effective ways to prevent the spread of harmful bacteria is by washing hands thoroughly before handling food. Use warm water and soap, and scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the restroom, touching raw meat or poultry, or handling pets. (Beavers AS et al., 2015 & Biranjia-Hurdayal et al., 2016).

Cross-contamination occurs when bacteria from raw foods, particularly meat, poultry, and seafood, come into contact with cooked or ready-to-eat foods. To prevent this, use separate cutting boards, utensils, and plates for raw and cooked foods. Store raw meats on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator to avoid drips onto other foods. (Chen H et al., 2021 & da Cunha DT et al., 2014).

Proper cooking temperatures kill harmful bacteria that may be present in food. Use a food thermometer to ensure that meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs are cooked to the recommended internal temperatures:

- Beef, pork, veal, and lamb: 145°F (63°C) with a three-minute rest time.
- Ground meats: 160°F (71°C).

- Poultry: 165°F (74°C).
- Fish: 145°F (63°C).
- Eggs: Cook until the yolk and white are firm.
- Leftovers: Reheat to 165°F (74°C).

Bacteria multiply rapidly in the "Danger Zone" between 40°F (4°C) and 140°F (60°C). To slow bacterial growth, refrigerate perishable foods within two hours of cooking or purchasing. Use shallow containers for quicker cooling, and keep the refrigerator temperature at or below 40°F (4°C) and the freezer at 0°F (-18°C) (da Cunha DT, 2021 & da Cunha DT et al., 2019).

When grocery shopping, select perishable items last and keep them separated from other groceries. Use insulated bags or coolers for transporting perishable items, especially during hot weather. Avoid buying dented or damaged cans, swollen containers, or packages with broken seals.

Check food labels for information on storage, handling, and expiry dates. Use the "First In, First Out" (FIFO) method when organizing your pantry and refrigerator to ensure that older items are used first. Discard any expired or spoiled foods promptly to prevent consumption of contaminated products (da Cunha DT, et al. 2014 & da Thaivalappil A et al., 2018).

Regularly clean and sanitize kitchen surfaces, including countertops, cutting boards, utensils, and appliances. Use hot, soapy water to wash surfaces after preparing raw meat, poultry, or seafood. Additionally, sanitize surfaces with a diluted bleach solution or a kitchen disinfectant to kill any lingering bacteria.

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CONCLUSION

By following these tips and best practices, consumers can significantly reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses and ensure the safety of the food they eat. Remember that food safety is a shared responsibility, and taking proactive steps to handle, prepare, and store food safely can protect yourself, your loved ones, and your community from foodborne hazards. Stay informed, stay vigilant, and enjoy your meals with peace of mind.

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