

Keeping Food Safe in Crises

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Food safety is a concept that we always need to remember. Whether it's cooking chicken to the proper temperature, how we thaw out a turkey, or the way we cleanse raw meats, there are many ways for food to get exposed to harmful organisms that can lead to illness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that there are roughly 48 million cases of foodborne illnesses every year in the United States. Of those 48 million, approximately 128,000 people are hospitalized and 3,000 die (www.cdc.gov). Some of the more common infections, such as *Norovirus* and *Salmonella*, can lead to nausea, diarrhea, and stomach pain, but usually clear up on their own in a matter of few days. Some of the less common infections, such as *E. Coli* and *Listeria*, are more dangerous and can lead to hospitalization.

However, when a family or a community is facing some type of health crisis, such as a natural disaster or a health pandemic, sometimes our routines change. For instance, if you are quarantined at home, you likely are eating more home-cooked meals. In addition, you may feel as though

you need to stock your pantry or freezer with more foods, making food storage safety more of a concern. Also, if you are eating at home more often, it's likely that you will have more leftovers, and handling those safely should be a priority. For that reason, it's important to keep safe and healthy practices in mind when preparing or storing food. Let's look at a few recommendations.

Cleaning and Preparation

One of the primary ways that you can prevent foodborne illnesses is the manner in which you sanitize the work area, wash your hands and prepare the ingredients. Here are three important factors to keep in mind:

- Always make sure to wash your hands, knives and cutting boards with antibacterial soap before and after you use them.
- Make sure you keep fresh meats and the associated kitchenware separate from other foods, like vegetables and fruits.
- Never rinse or wash the meats beforehand. Splattered water can contaminate surfaces.



Cooking to a Safe Temperature (www.usda.gov)

Making sure your food is cooked to the right temperature is about more than taste; it's also about safety. When handling chicken, beef, turkey, fish and other items, we need to be very careful to cook the food to an internal temperature that will destroy any harmful organisms. Below are the minimum internal temperatures to which each food should be prepared:

- Beef, Pork, Veal, & Lamb 160° F
- Chicken & Turkey 165° F
- Fish 145° F
- Leftovers 165° F
- Ham 165° F

Safe Storage of Leftovers

Storing your leftovers can be just as important as how you prepare your food. Storing them improperly can lead to poor quality, or worse, contaminated food. Freezing food for long periods of time (at or below 0° F) is a safe bet to prevent any contamination by harmful bacteria or viruses. However, with certain foods, freezing for too long can affect the quality when thawed. When it comes to refrigeration, foods can be kept anywhere from one day to several months, depending upon the food item. In order to find specific information on how long a food can be kept refrigerated, go to USDA.gov and find the Food Safety Basics page. Here are some general reminders when storing food:

- Make sure that your refrigerator and freezer are operating correctly. If need be, purchase an appliance thermometer to make sure.

- Always store in proper containers.
- Make sure to label your foods with the name and date.
- Organize your freezer or refrigerator so that the most perishable items are easiest to see and access.
- Follow the 'first in, first out' rule.

Food safety is always important, but it's especially important in times of crises when stress is high and routines change. Practicing good food safety techniques can keep your family healthy and safe while enabling good nutrition at the same time.

Safe cooking!



Sources

www.CDC.gov
www.USDA.gov