
Food Safety: Four Steps to Check

Four Steps to Check: Clean, Separate, Cook and Chill



Step 1: Clean hands, surfaces, utensils and fruits or vegetables

Wash your hands often:

- Wash your hands before, during, and after preparing food, and before eating food.
- Wash your hands any time they could be dirty.

Hand washing instructions:

- Wet your hands with warm or cold running water and apply soap.
- Rub your hands together to make a lather and scrub them well. Be sure to scrub the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your nails.
- Continue rubbing hands for at least 10 seconds.
 - Singing the entire “Happy Birthday” song twice is equal to 20 seconds if you don’t have a timer.
- Rinse your hands well under running water.
- Dry your hands using a clean dry towel or disposable towel.
- Wash your hands often, especially during these key times when germs can spread:
 - **Before, during, and after** preparing food
 - **After** handling raw meat, poultry, seafood, or their juices, or uncooked eggs
 - **Before** eating
 - **After** using the toilet
 - **After** changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet
 - **After** touching an animal, animal feed, or animal waste
 - **After** touching garbage

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- **Before** and **after** caring for someone who is sick
 - **Before** and **after** treating a cut or wound
 - **After** blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
 - **After** handling pet food or pet treats.

Wash surfaces and utensils after each use:

- Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter tops with hot, soapy water after and between preparing each different food item.

Step 2: Separate to avoid cross-contamination

Avoid cross-contamination during cooking:

- Use one cutting board for fresh produce or other foods that won't be cooked before they are eaten, and a separate cutting board for raw meat, poultry, or seafood. Replace cutting boards when they are worn.
- Use separate plates and utensils for cooked and raw foods.
- Use hot, soapy water to thoroughly wash all plates, utensils, and cutting boards that touched raw meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, or flour after use.

Avoid cross-contamination during grocery shopping:

- In your shopping cart, separate raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs from other foods and place packages of raw meat, poultry, and seafood in plastic bags if available. When you check out, place raw meat, poultry, and seafood in separate bags from other foods.

Avoid cross-contamination during food storage:

- At home, place raw meat, poultry, and seafood in containers or sealed, leakproof plastic bags. Freeze them if you're not planning to use them within a few days.

Wash fruits and veggies, but not meat, poultry, or eggs:

- Rinse fruits and vegetables under running water without soap or bleach
- Rinse fruits and vegetables before peeling, removing skin, or cutting away any damaged or bruised areas.
- Scrub firm produce like melons or cucumbers with a clean produce brush.
- Dry produce with a paper towel or clean cloth towel.
- Don't wash meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood to avoid spreading harmful germs around your kitchen.
- Produce labeled as "pre-washed" does not need to be washed again.

Step 3: Avoiding the Temperature Danger Zone

Cook foods to correct temperatures:

- Color and texture can't tell you if a food is at the correct temperature. Use a food thermometer to be sure your food is safe. When you think your food is done, place the food thermometer in the thickest part of the food, making sure not to touch bone, fat, or gristle.
- Food is safely cooked when the internal temperature is high enough to kill germs that can make you sick. Reference [Cook to a Safe Minimum Internal Temperature | FoodSafety.gov](#) to know what temperatures to cook different foods to.

Cooking in your microwave safely:

- Read package directions for cooking and follow them exactly to make sure food is thoroughly cooked.
- Stop microwave and stir foods halfway through heating. If the food label says, "Let stand for 'x' minutes after cooking," follow the directions — letting microwaved food sit for a few minutes allows food to cook thoroughly as colder areas absorb heat from hotter areas.
- Follow package directions for commercially prepared frozen food; some are not designed to be stirred while heating.
- Use a food thermometer to make sure food is 165°F or warmer.

Keep hot food hot:

- The bacteria that cause food poisoning multiply quickest between 41°F and 135°F. This temperature range is called the danger zone.
- After food is cooked, keep food at 135°F or above.
- Use a heat source like a chafing dish, warming tray, or slow cooker to keep food warm or eat food immediately after cooking.

Step 4: Chill food in the refrigerator quickly and thaw safely

Transporting cold food safely:

- Never leave perishable foods out of refrigeration for more than 2 hours.
- When transporting food, consider cooler, cooler bags or ice packs to keep foods below 70°F.
- If the food is exposed to temperatures above 90°F (like a hot car or summer

picnic), refrigerate it within 1 hour.

Storing cold food safely:

- Your fridge should be between 32°F and 40°F.
- Your freezer should be 0°F or below.
- Make sure to consume or discard leftovers within 7 days.
- Make sure to consume or discard commercial foods by the use-by-date listed on packaging.
- Reference ([Cold Food Storage Chart | FoodSafety.gov](#)) for how long to keep perishable foods before they should be thrown out.
- Freezing does not destroy harmful germs, but it does keep food safe until you can cook it.

Properly chilling foods:

- Do not put hot foods directly into freezer, chill in refrigerator first until cool.
- Use shallow containers to help leftovers chill faster.

Thaw foods safely to avoid growth of harmful bacteria:

- Never thaw or marinate foods on the counter.
- Thaw or marinate foods in the refrigerator if you can. Place the food on a plate or in a container to prevent any juices from leaking.
- To thaw food faster, you can put the frozen package in a watertight plastic bag and submerge it in cold running water less than 70°F.
- Follow instructions in your owner's manual to safely thaw foods in the microwave and then cook immediately.
- It is safe to cook food from the frozen state without thawing, but it may take longer.

Additional Food Safety Tips

- If you're planning a buffet at home and are not sure how quickly the food will be eaten, keep buffet serving portions small.
- Hot foods should be kept at an internal temperature of 135°F or warmer.
- Cold foods should be kept at an internal temperature of 41°F or colder.
- Use a food thermometer to check temperatures.
- Serve or keep food hot in chafing dishes, slow cookers, and warming trays.
- Keep cold foods refrigerated until serving time.
- If food is going to stay out on the buffet table longer than 2 hours, place plates of cold food on ice to retain the chill.
- Don't add new food to an already filled serving dish. Instead, replace nearly empty serving dishes with freshly filled ones.
- Be aware that during the party, bacteria from people's hands can contaminate the

food. Plus, bacteria can multiply at room temperature.

- Remember the 2-Hour Rule: Discard any perishables left out at room temperature for more than 2 hours unless you're keeping it hot or cold.
- When preparing foods that call for raw or lightly cooked eggs, such as homemade Caesar salad dressing, ice cream, custards, rice pudding, chocolate mousse, eggnog, and some sauces, make sure to use pasteurized eggs. Reference ways to adapt recipes through the link below.

Information adapted from www.foodsafety.gov, www.cdc.gov/food-safety/ and <https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/serving-safe-buffets>.

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