



# Foodborne Illness: A Food Safety Issue

No one is immune to food borne illness. It can affect anyone anytime, but some people and groups are at an increased risk of developing a foodborne illness. These include small children, the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. Symptoms of foodborne illness usually occur 24 hours or more after eating a particular food and can last up to ten days. It presents with flu-like symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or fever. You may not, however, display all of these symptoms.

The most common cause of food virus outbreaks are the results of uncooked foods or foods that have been contaminated after cooking. Cooking denatures the protein that protects the virus so it is very important to cook food thoroughly before eating it. Remember that although viruses are resistant to cold, chilling or freezing does not eliminate viruses.

Some foods are more prone to foodborne illness than others. Foods rich in protein, such as meat, poultry and seafood, are involved in foodborne illness outbreaks because these foods tend to be of animal origin and can contain microorganisms of animal origins. In addition, bacteria breaks the protein down into amino acids which are an important source of nutrition to some bacteria. Dangerous bacteria can also thrive in products with high moisture content including starchy, egg-rich foods and cream-based foods, such as potato or pasta salads, cream-based soups and custard and cream pies.

## Senior Note

If you serve food to senior citizens, it is especially important to be vigilant against foodborne illnesses. As people age, their body's ability to combat bacteria diminishes. Seniors have a decrease in stomach acid secretion—the body's natural defense against ingested bacteria. As we age, too, our immune system is less adept at getting rid of dangerous bacteria. Another risk factor for older people is their sometimes diminished or altered sense of smell or taste, often caused by disease and/or medication. This can

make it difficult to tell when milk is sour or meat is spoiled. For more information, read *For Your Health! Food Safety for Seniors* on the Federal Citizen Information Center's website ([www.pueblo.gsa.gov](http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov)).

## Foodborne Illness Prevention

### Store Cooked Immediately

Cooking foods at appropriate temperatures for appropriate times is only one step in preventing food poisoning. In order to avoid the development of bacterium, such as *Staphylococcus*, cooked foods must not be left out at room temperature for more than two hours.



If you cannot use all of the food you receive immediately, date leftovers so they can be used within a safe time. Most leftovers remain safe in the refrigerator for three to five days.

If you cannot serve the food immediately or keep it hot, it's best to store the food until another time. The food will taste better and be safely stored if you:

- Divide large quantities into small portions and place in shallow containers.
- Cover loosely and refrigerate immediately.
- Reheat thoroughly before serving.

When you are reheating food before serving, reheat to a temperature of 165°F or until it is hot and steaming. If you are using a microwave, cover the product and rotate while cooking to avoid uneven cooking.



## Keep Your Kitchen Clean

An often overlooked source of bacterial growth is the sink drain, disposal and connecting pipe. To ensure a safe food preparation area, these areas should be sanitized occasionally by pouring a solution of 1 teaspoon of chlorine bleach in 1 quart of water down the drain. Bleach and commercial kitchen cleaning agents are the best sanitizers. Hot, soapy water will clean an area, but it will not kill bacteria.

Sponges and dishcloths can become breeding grounds for dangerous bacteria when they are not kept clean. Routinely run your dishcloths through the washing

and your sponges through the dishwasher to ensure a bacteria-free environment.

Cutting boards can also harbor bacteria. After using the cutting board, wash it with hot, soapy water using a scrub brush. Always wash and sanitize your cutting board after using it for raw meat, poultry and seafood and before use with ready-to-eat foods.

## Check Your Temperature

Refrigerators should stay at 41°F or less. Temperatures at and below this mark slow the growth of bacteria. Freezing at zero F or less stops bacterial growth. It will not kill bacteria that is already present.

If Loaves & Fishes delivers hot food to your organization, please serve the food within two hours of delivery. If you cannot serve the food within two hours, set the oven temperature high enough to keep the hot food at 140°F or above. Before serving the food, check the product with a meat thermometer. Please remember that harmful bacteria can multiply between 40°F and 140°F. Simply keeping food warm is not good enough!



## Donations: Be on the Look Out

Most of the food you receive from Loaves & Fishes is prepared and perishable. However, we do occasionally distribute groceries. Please be on the look out for:

- Cans that are bulging or dented or in jars that are cracked or have loose or bulging lids.
- Expiration dates on the labels that have passed.
- “Use by” or “sell by” dates that are expired on dairy products, such as cottage cheese & yogurt.
- Bags of frozen seafood that are open, torn or crushed on the edges. If the package is transparent, look for signs of frost or ice crystals on the product. This could indicate that the fish has been stored for a long time or thawed & refroze.

### SOURCES:

Office of Constituent Operations, May 1997.

FA/CFSAN Food Safety A to Z Reference Guide, September 2001.

Food Safety and Inspection Service, USDA, Consumer Education and Information. *Seniors Need Wisdom on Food Safety*, October 2002.

## Volunteer Tips for Safe Food Handling:

As a Loaves & Fishes volunteer, it is important for you to practice safe food handling techniques at all times. We suggest you:

- Stay home when you do not feel well. Sick volunteers can transmit diseases to food and to other people. Please allow the volunteer coordinator to substitute a drive for your route if you are experiencing diarrhea, vomiting, jaundice, fever or a sore throat.
- Use deli tissue, spatulas, tongs, dispensing equipment or single-use gloves to help keep bare hands from touching ready-to-eat foods.
- Provide a barrier to any skin lesions, open wounds, boils or infected wounds on your hands or arms.
- Transport food to the recipient organization immediately to prevent any bacteria from rapidly multiplying in the food.
- In hot weather, place food items in the air-conditioned compartment of your car rather than the hot trunk.
- When transporting perishable foods, always use cold packs or ice in your cooler.

## For More Information

The Food and Drug Administration offers a Food Information Line at 1-888-SAFEFOOD (1-888-723-3366). This line offers recorded information 24 hours a day, every day. FDA public affairs specialists are available to answer questions from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. EST on weekdays.

If you have a question about meat, poultry or eggs, call the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Meat and Poultry Hotline at (800) 535-4555.

For questions regarding all other foods, call the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Information Line at (888) SAFE FOOD.

FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Consumer Education Staff (HFS-555), 5100 Paint Branch Parkway, College Park, MD 20740.

Food Safety and Education Communications Staff, Room 2932-S, 1400 Independence Avenue S.W., Washington, DC 20250-3700.