

Eating Out and Taking Food Home

Let's face it. Sometimes it's just easier and more enjoyable to let someone else do the cooking. And for today's busy society there are many eating options. All of these options, however, do have food safety implications that you need to be aware of.

Complete Meals to Go and Home Delivered Meals

When you want to eat at home but don't feel like cooking or aren't able to, where do you turn?

- Many convenience foods, including complete meals to go, are experiencing runaway popularity.
- Purchased from grocery stores, delis or restaurants, some meals are hot and some are cold.
- Ordering delivered meals from restaurants or restaurant-delivery services is an option many consumers like to take advantage of.
- And of course, for those who qualify, there are programs like Meals on Wheels that provide a ready-prepared meal each day.

Hot or cold ready-prepared meals are perishable and can cause illness when mishandled. **Proper handling is essential to ensure the food is safe.**

The 2-Hour Rule

Harmful bacteria can grow rapidly in the "danger zone" (between 41°F and 140°F). So, remember the 2-hour rule. **Discard any perishable foods left at room temperature longer than 2 hours.**



When you purchase hot cooked food, keep it hot. Eat and enjoy your food within 2 hours to prevent harmful bacteria from multiplying. If you are not eating within 2 hours, keep your food in the oven set at a high enough temperature to keep the food at or above 140°F (Use a food thermometer to check the temperature). Stuffing and side dishes must also stay hot. Covering food with foil will help keep it moist.

Rather than keeping cooked food warming in an oven for an extended period of time, cooked foods will taste better if you refrigerate them and then re-heat when you are ready to eat. So, if you've invited guests over for your pre-prepared meal, you may want to simply finish cooking your meals and then refrigerate them until your guests arrive. Then you would merely re-heat the dinners and enjoy the food and the company.

- Divide meat or poultry into small portions to refrigerate or freeze.
- Refrigerate or freeze gravy, potatoes, and other vegetables in shallow containers.
- Remove stuffing from whole cooked poultry and refrigerate.

Cold food should also be eaten within 2 hours or refrigerated or frozen for eating another time.

Reheating

You may wish to reheat your meal, whether it was purchased hot and then refrigerated or purchased cold initially.

- Heat thoroughly to 165°F until hot and steaming.
- Bring gravy to a rolling boil.
- If heating in a microwave oven, cover food and rotate dish so it heats evenly. Inadequate heating in the microwave can contribute to illnesses. Consult your owner's manual for complete instructions.

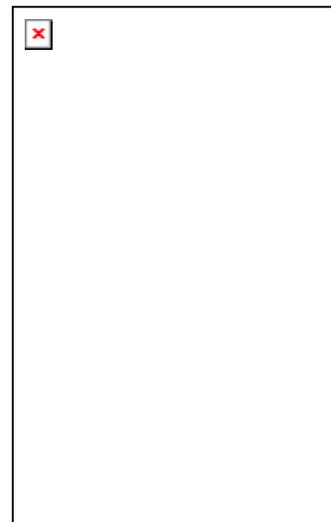
Eating Out

Whether you're eating out at an upscale restaurant, a senior center, or a fast food diner, this can be both a safe and enjoyable experience if you take the same precautions you would if you were eating at home.

All food service establishments are required to follow food safety and sanitation guidelines set by state and local health departments to ensure cleanliness and good hygiene. However, when you go out to eat, look at how clean things are before you ever sit down. Are the tables, dinnerware, and bathrooms neat and tidy? If not, it may be better to dine somewhere else. A dirty dining room may indicate a dirty kitchen, and a dirty kitchen may lead to unsafe food.

Seniors and people with particular dietary requirements need to avoid the same foods in restaurants that they avoid at home. If you are unsure about the ingredients in a particular dish, ask before ordering it. If you are watching your salt intake, request no added salt if possible. Most fast food restaurants are happy to comply and will serve you french fries directly from the hot oil without salting them. Most sit-down restaurants will custom cook according to your needs, if you ask.

No matter where you eat out, always order your food "well done." Remember that foods like meat, poultry, fish, and eggs need to be cooked thoroughly to kill off harmful bacteria. When you're served a meal, check how well it's cooked before you eat it. Make sure it's served to you piping hot and thoroughly cooked, and if it's not, send it back.



The Doggie Bag

It seems like meal portions are getting bigger and bigger these days. Which means that there is another meal waiting for another day. Care must be taken when handling these leftovers. If you will not be arriving home within 2 hours of finishing your meal, it is safer to leave the leftovers at the restaurant. Also, remember that the inside of a car can get very warm. Bacteria may grow rapidly, so it is always safer to go directly home after eating and put your leftovers in the refrigerator.