

Safe Food to Go



Celebrations away from home, such as potlucks, family reunions, picnics, or tailgating often offer a challenge to even the accomplished cook. Following safe food handling practices will allow guests at the celebration to take home good memories instead of a case of foodborne illness.

Planning

Plan the menu around safe food handling. Remember, perishable foods such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, and combination salads must be kept cold. Even fresh fruits and vegetables must be handled with care. Cooked foods should be kept hot. If you are planning to purchase take-out foods, such as fried chicken or barbecued beef, eat them within two hours of pickup. Otherwise, buy cooked foods ahead of time to chill before packing them appropriately in the cooler.

Cleanliness

Hand washing is the single most effective action in preventing the spread of disease-causing bacteria. Wash your hands thoroughly before handling food and between jobs. Use soap and water. Scrub for at least 30 seconds. The same technique is required if you use disposable towelettes or instant antibacterial hand gels.



A hand washing station can be set up at a picnic site by placing water in an unplugged coffee urn or a large insulated drink container with a spigot. You will need liquid soap, paper towels, a container to catch the wastewater, and a proper place for used paper towels. Dirty utensils, dishware, and cooking equipment should be stored in a large, covered container to prevent the attraction of flies and other insects. The use of paper products may be an easier option.

When you get home, wash, rinse, and sanitize all equipment and utensils. Use two tablespoons of bleach per gallon of warm water to sanitize. To clean food preparation surfaces, clean the surface first with warm, soapy water. Then spray the surface with sanitizing solution, spread the solution over the surface with a clean paper towel, and air-dry.

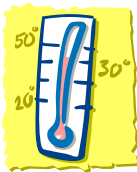
Besides washing hands, practice other good personal hygiene such as:

- wearing clean clothing and a clean apron
- keeping hair tied back and covered with a head covering
- not chewing tobacco, smoking, eating or drinking while working with food
- not serving food when ill
- not coughing or sneezing on food.

To prevent contamination, cover all food with plastic wrap, aluminum foil, or lids, or keep foods and supplies in their original packaging. Garbage cans with plastic liners and lids should be available.

Safe Food Handling Practices

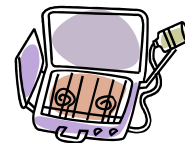
- Use only food from approved sources. Never use home-canned foods.
- Do not thaw foods at room temperature. Thaw in the refrigerator or in cool running water changed every 30 minutes, or defrost in the microwave and cook immediately.
- Do not partially cook or microwave meat for later grilling. When you must cook ahead, cook the food completely and refrigerate immediately. Then, pack in a cooler with ice. Reheat quickly to 165°F on the grill.
- Improper cooling is one of the most common causes of foodborne illness. If your group is preparing large quantities of food, such as lasagna, barbecue, or roasts in advance, cool the food rapidly in small, shallow containers. Slice roasts and whole turkeys into portion sizes and refrigerate or freeze in pans or platters. Items such as barbecue, chili, or stews should be cooled in shallow pans.
- Marinate food in the refrigerator. Do not re-use the marinade. Instead, prepare a new recipe for basting or use as a dipping sauce.
- Cook food thoroughly to destroy bacteria that might be present. The color of cooked meat and poultry is not a sign of its safety. The use of a thermometer is the only way to accurately determine that meat or poultry has reached a safe, minimum internal temperature of 165°F. The pink color in safely cooked meat and poultry may be due to a change in hemoglobin in tissues, when it is heated.
- Thoroughly wash or scrub produce in running water before cutting or eating.



Keeping Food Hot or Cold

There are limits to how long hot or cold food can be transported or held safely in coolers. Use a sturdy, insulated cooler or thermos. Pack cold food with plenty of ice or frozen gel packs. To avoid cross-contamination, wrap foods well and store raw food separately from ready-to-eat foods. Perishable foods should not be kept at temperatures above 40°F for more than two hours. When the outside temperature is 90°F or higher, food should be discarded after one hour. Delivered food should be kept hot or cold.

Hot food should be kept at 140°F or hotter until served. If an oven or stove is not available, keep food hot with a camping stove, propane gas grill, canned heat fuel surrounded by a strip of foil to act as a windbreak, or a charcoal grill. Have an easily cleanable thermometer handy – and use it!



Cold food should be kept 40°F or colder until served. If a refrigerator or refrigerated truck that will keep the air temperature at 40°F or colder is not available, use commercially-prepared ice. Have an adequate supply of ice on hand. Use separate insulated coolers for holding raw foods, cooked foods, prepared chilled foods, or beverages. Cover coolers with blankets and place them in the shade to help hold the cold temperature.

References

- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (August 2006). *How Temperatures Affect Foods*.
- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (May 2007). *Safe Food Handling on the Road*.
- USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (April 2006). *Focus On Chicken*.

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Sandra Bastin, PhD, RD, LD, CCE
Extension Food and Nutrition Specialist

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