



Food Safety: Instructions on Food Labels

Many people have a role in making sure the food you eat is safe. These include farmers, processors, distributors, retailers and others.

You also have an important role in ensuring the food you and your family eat stays safe. Follow the instructions on the package for storing, handling and cooking foods. This applies to all foods, especially processed or packaged foods.

Some instructions on packages that help keep food safe include:

- Keep Refrigerated
- Refrigerate After Opening
- Best Before Date
- Cook Thoroughly
- Allergy Warning

Keep Refrigerated

If the package says **keep refrigerated** or similar wording, refrigerate the food *at all times*. This includes before opening the food and afterwards if keeping it for later use.

When foods are first packaged, they can sometimes contain small numbers of germs. However, these are so low that most people eating the food do not get sick. As long as the food is kept refrigerated, the germs cannot multiply (some germs can but very slowly) and cause illness.

In 2006 at least 6 people got sick with botulism after drinking pasteurized carrot juice, which had not been refrigerated after purchasing. Botulism spores in the juice multiplied and produced a deadly toxin. Botulism is a very serious illness that can cause paralysis or death.

Refrigerate After Opening

Some foods must be kept refrigerated only after opening the package. If the package says **refrigerate after opening** or similar wording, be sure to refrigerate that food immediately after opening it. As long as the food is kept refrigerated after opening, germs cannot multiply and cause illness. If the food is not refrigerated, someone eating that food can get sick from the germs.

To stop germs from growing, make sure the temperature in your refrigerator is 4°C (40°F) or cooler.

Best Before Date

Many foods have a **best before date** printed on the label. If you store the food as recommended, the food should be safe until this date. After this date, the manufacturer cannot guarantee the food's nutritional value and quality, even if refrigerated and cooked properly. You cannot always tell if food is unsafe by how it looks, smells, or tastes. You should always discard any food after the best before date.

Cook Thoroughly

While some processed or packaged foods are fully cooked, other foods are not and may contain raw ingredients and germs. Warming up a food may not destroy the germs. Only proper cooking destroys germs and makes the food safe to eat. If cooking instructions say **cook thoroughly** or **must be cooked**, or similar wording, follow the manufacturer's cooking instructions.

Foods containing raw ingredients, including raw meat, poultry, eggs and fish, are safe if

cooked to an internal temperature of at least 74°C (165°F) or more.

Handle food that requires cooking like any other raw food product. After handling these foods, wash your hands and disinfect all utensils, cutting boards and counters used for their preparation. Use hot, soapy water and a bleach solution for disinfectant, consisting of 1 teaspoon of bleach in 750 milliliters of water.

Allergy Warning

Some processed or packaged foods have an **allergy warning**, stating that the product may contain trace amounts of nuts or soya or other common food allergen. The manufacturer cannot guarantee that the food is free of the listed allergen(s). For most people, there is no health concern if an allergen may be present in a food.

Allergy warnings are for people with severe food allergies. The warnings help avoid foods that cause allergic reactions. For some people, even small amounts of an allergen can cause a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) and even death. If you have a severe food allergy, you should always avoid foods with an allergy warning for foods or ingredients to which you are allergic. For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#100a Severe Food Allergies in Children](#).

In 2003 at least 23 people got sick with Salmonella after eating frozen breaded chicken fingers, strips and nuggets. The chicken products appeared to be already cooked when removed from the package. However, they were only partially cooked, and they were to be fully cooked by the consumer. Some foods, like raw poultry, can contain germs such as Salmonella. These foods must be cooked properly to be safe. For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#17 Salmonellosis](#).

Understanding Instructions

Read all food safety instruction on labels and packages. If you do not understand the instructions, ask someone to explain these to you. Contact the food processor directly, or ask your family, neighbour or grocery store employee for more information.

For More Information

For more information on food safety, see the following HealthLink BC Files:

[#59a Food Safety: Ten Easy Steps to Make Food Safe](#)

[#59b Food Safety for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables](#)

[#76 Foods to Avoid for People at Risk of Food-borne Illness](#)

Visit the Canadian Food Inspection Agency at: www.inspection.gc.ca/english/toce.shtml.

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.



BC Centre for Disease Control
AN AGENCY OF THE PROVINCIAL HEALTH SERVICES AUTHORITY