

Food safety: Easy ways to make food safer

Eating food contaminated with germs causes foodborne illness, also known as food poisoning. Common symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain and fever. In Canada, over 4 million people get sick from foodborne illness each year.

What can I do to prevent foodborne illness?

Wash your hands

Wash your hands before you eat or handle any food, and after you use the bathroom. Scrub all parts of your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds and rinse them under warm water. Dry your hands with a clean cloth or paper towel.

Clean kitchen tools and surfaces

Wash plates, utensils, cutting boards and countertops with hot soapy water. Change dishcloths daily to prevent the spread of germs.

For added protection, sanitize kitchen tools and surfaces after cleaning. Use a food surface approved sanitizer or make your own sanitizer with bleach and water. Always follow instructions on the product label. Some dishwashers can sanitize, check the manual to see if yours does.

Wash fresh fruits and vegetables

Thoroughly wash fruits and vegetables under cool, running water before eating or cutting them, even if you plan to peel them. Use a clean produce brush to scrub fruits and vegetables with firm skin like carrots, potatoes and cantaloupe.

Separate raw meat from other foods

Germs from raw foods can spread to other foods when not handled properly. This is called cross contamination. To reduce the risk:

- Separate raw meat, poultry and seafood from other foods in your grocery cart, shopping bags, and in the fridge
- Use one cutting board for raw meats and a different one for ready-to-eat foods like fresh fruits and vegetables

Cook foods to a safe temperature

Cooking foods to an internal temperature of 74°C (165°F) or hotter kills germs. To check the temperature, insert a clean food thermometer all the way to the middle of the food and avoid touching any bones.

Heat foods evenly in the microwave

To make sure that foods cook or reheat evenly in the microwave:

- Cover foods with a microwave-safe lid or plastic wrap. Leave a small space so steam can get out
- Cut food into smaller pieces
- Stir or rotate food halfway through cooking
- Let the food stand for at least 2 minutes at the end of heating

Follow food package instructions

Some packaged foods are fully cooked and ready-to-eat. Other foods are not and may contain raw ingredients. Always read the label and follow cooking and storage instructions.

Keep foods out of the danger zone

Germs grow rapidly at temperatures between 4°C and 60°C. This is called the “danger zone”. Don’t keep meat, poultry, fish, dairy or cooked leftovers at room temperature for more than 2 hours.

Thaw foods in the fridge

The safest way to thaw food is in the fridge. Place the food in a drip-proof container and store it on the bottom shelf. To thaw faster, place food under cold water or use the microwave. If you defrost food in the microwave, cook it right away.

Handle leftovers safely

Refrigerate leftovers within two hours of preparing. Keep your fridge set at 4°C (40°F) or lower to keep foods safe.

Large or very hot items such as roasts or soups are difficult to cool. To help cool foods quickly:

- Use shallow containers
- Split larger items into smaller portions
- Cool very hot items at room temperature at first. Place them in the fridge when steaming stops
- Leave food uncovered until it reaches fridge temperature

Eat leftovers within 2 to 3 days. Reheat to at least 74°C (165°F).

If in doubt, throw it out

Do not take chances with your food. Remember, contaminated foods may not look or smell bad, so if in doubt, throw it out.

Who is at highest risk of foodborne illness?

- Children under 5 years

- People who are pregnant
- Adults 60 years and over
- People with a compromised immune system

Health Canada provides additional tips for those at highest risk:

www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-safety-vulnerable-populations.html.

For more information

- Health Canada: Food Safety and You www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/general-food-safety-tips/food-safety-you.html
- BC Centre for Disease Control: Cleaning and Disinfecting www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/prevention-risks/cleaning-and-disinfecting



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority