

Summer food safety

Last updated: **June 13, 2025**

Summer is a time for barbecues, picnics and camping trips. However, fun outdoor meals can come with an increased risk of food borne illness (food poisoning) without thoughtful care and preparation. Food borne illness is caused by eating food contaminated with bacteria, viruses and/or parasites. Common causes of food borne illness are from *Norovirus*, *Listeria*, *Salmonella*, *E. coli* and *Campylobacter*. Health Canada estimates there are about 4 million cases of food borne illness every year in Canada. Most food borne illnesses are entirely preventable.

The risk of food borne illness can increase during the summer because:

- Hot and humid weather can create conditions for bacteria to grow and thrive
- Food safety can be more challenging when we cook and eat outdoors

Symptoms common to most food borne illnesses are cramps, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, headaches and fever. Symptoms usually appear within several hours of eating the contaminated food but can sometimes take several days or weeks to appear. Most people recover completely from food borne illness. Some people will have longer lasting and more serious effects. Those at highest risk of foodborne illness are children under 5 years, people who are pregnant, adults 60 years and over and people with a compromised immune system.

The following tips will help you reduce your risk of food borne illness.

Chill

- Keep food cold. Bacteria multiply fastest between 4°C and 60°C (40°F – 140°F) – also called the 'danger zone'. Don't keep food at room temperature for more than one hour on hot summer days
 - Bring along ice packs to pack around perishable foods
 - Pack the cooler until it is full. This will keep the food cold longer. Keep the cooler out of the sun and keep the lid on as much as possible. If you can, keep snacks and drinks in a separate cooler. These are things you will access often and every time you open the cooler, you let warm air in
 - Refrigerate or freeze food the day before your outing so it is already cold when you put it into the cooler

- Marinate your meat in the fridge ahead of time, and not on the counter or out in the heat

Separate

- Avoid cross-contamination. Keep raw meat, fish, poultry and eggs away from fresh fruits and vegetables and cooked foods
 - Pack a separate cooler to keep ready-to-eat foods away from foods that need cooking, or pack raw meats on the bottom of a single cooler so their juices don't drip onto, and contaminate, ready-to-eat foods
 - Use ice packs instead of loose ice. Loose ice will melt and can transfer bacteria from one food to another

Clean

- Wash your hands, the cooking utensils and surfaces with hot soapy water (for at least 20 seconds)
 - Bring along 2 sets of cutting boards and utensils: one for ready-to-eat foods and one for raw foods. Keep each in a separate, sealed plastic bag to prevent cross contamination
 - Use hand sanitizer and antibacterial wipes for hand and surface cleaning if there is no hot soapy water available. Remember, hot soapy water is the best option for removing bacteria and dirt so wash these surfaces as soon as you can
 - Wash the inside of your cooler at home before and after each use
- Wash vegetables, fruit and fresh herbs under cool running water before eating or cooking

Cook

- Cook foods to the appropriate cooking temperature

Take along a digital food thermometer. Refer to the chart below for the proper temperatures. To check the temperature, insert a clean thermometer all the way to the middle of the food and avoid touching any bones.

 - Preheat the grill for about 20 minutes before cooking. Visit [Government of Canada - Food safety tips for barbecuing](#) for more information
 - Do not put cooked food back on the same plate that held the raw food (unless you have washed it with hot soapy water first)

Food	Internal temperature
Hamburgers	160°F (71°C)
Steak – medium rare	145°F (63°C)
Steak – medium	160°F (71°C)
Steak – well done	170°F (77°C)
Gamey or game meat (That is, Deer, Elk, Moose, Caribou, Reindeer, Antelope, Pronghorn, Bear, Bison, Musk-Ox, Walrus, Beaver, Muskrat, Hare)	165°F (74°C)
Poultry	165°F (74°C)
Fish	158°F (70°C), until it is opaque and flakes easily
Shellfish and crustaceans (That is, Crab, Lobster, Shrimp, Clams, Mussels, Oysters, Scallops)	165°F (74°C), throw away any shellfish that do not open
Hot dogs	165°F (74°C)
Leftovers	165°F (74°C)

Visit [Government of Canada - Safe cooking temperatures](#) for more information.

Make sure your water source is safe

- Even if a lake or river looks safe, it may not be. Only use water from a source you know to be safe
- Use bottled water for drinking, cooking and brushing teeth
- Boil untreated water at a rolling boil for two minutes before using. If boiling water is not possible, use water purification tablets or water filters and follow the manufacturer's instructions

For more information on food safety, visit [HealthLink BC - Food, water and beverage safety](#).