

Food Safety: Instructions on Food Labels

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

You also have an important role in ensuring the food you and your family eat stays safe. Always follow the instructions on the package for how to store, handle and cook foods. This applies to all foods, including processed or packaged foods.

Some instructions you may see on packages include:

- Keep refrigerated
- Refrigerate after opening
- Best before date
- Cook thoroughly
- Allergy warning

What does “keep refrigerated” mean?

If the package says “keep refrigerated,” or similar wording, refrigerate the food or beverage at all times. This includes before and after you open the food package.

Bacteria, also known as germs, live everywhere, including in our food. When food is first packaged, it contains a small number of germs. This number is so low that most people who eat the food do not get sick. When food is refrigerated, germs grow slowly and the food is safe for a longer time. Without refrigeration, germs grow quickly and can make people sick.

In 2011, at least 2 people became ill with botulism after tasting potato soup which had not been refrigerated after being purchased from a local grocer. Botulism spores in the soup multiplied and produced a deadly toxin. Botulism is a very serious illness that can cause paralysis or death.

What does “refrigerate after opening” mean?

Some foods must be kept refrigerated only after opening the package. If the package says “refrigerate after opening” or similar wording, refrigerate that food or beverage immediately after opening it. If food is kept refrigerated after opening, germs cannot multiply quickly and cause illness. If the food is not refrigerated, the germs in the food can multiply and larger quantities of bacteria increase the likelihood of a person becoming ill if they eat the food.

To slow the growth of germs, the temperature in your refrigerator must be 4°C (40°F) or cooler.

What does “best before date” mean?

Many foods have a “best before” date printed on the label. The best before date does not guarantee food safety, but it gives you information about the freshness and likely the shelf-life of the unopened food product. Once the package has been opened, the food should be stored properly and be eaten within a few days.

You cannot always tell if food is safe by how it looks, smells or tastes. Always throw away any food after the “best before” date.

What does “cook thoroughly” mean?

Properly cooking food kills most bacteria and makes the food safe to eat. Some processed or packaged foods are fully cooked and ready-to-eat. Other foods are not and may contain raw ingredients. If cooking instructions say “cook thoroughly” or “must be cooked,” or similar wording, follow the manufacturer’s cooking instructions. Warming up a food doesn’t destroy the bacteria.

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). Use a clean and sanitized thermometer to check the temperature.

In March 2013, 24 people became ill with *E.coli* after eating frozen mini pizzas, mini quesadillas and mozzarella bites. These products appeared to be fully cooked. However, they were only partially cooked, and needed to be fully cooked by the consumer. Some foods, like raw and undercooked beef, can contain bacteria such as *E.coli*. These foods must be cooked properly to be safe.

When preparing raw products, wash your hands before and after handling these foods. Wash all utensils, cutting boards and counters with hot, soapy water. For added protection from germs, sanitize surfaces using a 200 parts per million (ppm) bleach solution.

How to make a 200 ppm no rinse sanitizing solution:

- Mix 15 mL (1 tablespoon) of household bleach into 4 litres (1 gallon) of water; or mix 5 mL (1 teaspoon) of household bleach into 1 litre (4 cups) of water.
- Allow the sanitizer to contact the surface or utensil for at least 1 minute before wiping off with a clean paper towel or allowing to air dry.

Use Public Health Ontario's chlorine dilution calculator tool to make up the proper sanitizer strength based on the concentration of your bleach product
www.publichealthontario.ca/en/ServicesAndTools/Tools/Pages/Dilution-Calculator.aspx

What does “allergy warning” mean?

Some processed or packaged foods have an allergy warning, stating that the product “may contain” one or more common food allergens like nuts or soya. The manufacturer cannot guarantee that the food is free of the listed allergen(s).

Allergy warnings are for people with severe food allergies. The warnings help people 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, avoid foods with an allergy warning for foods or ingredients to which you are allergic. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #100a Severe Allergic Reactions to Food: Children and Teens](#).

What can I do if I don't understand the 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 about food safety, see the following:

- [HealthLinkBC File#59a Food Safety: Easy Ways to Make Food Safe](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #59b Food Safety for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #76 Foods to Avoid for People at Higher Risk of Food-borne Illness](#)
- Healthy Canadians – Food Safety
www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/topics/food-safety.html

To learn about food labelling, visit the following websites:

- Healthy Canadians – Food labels
www.canada.ca/en/services/health/food-labels.html
- Canadian Food Inspection Agency – Date Labelling on Pre-packaged Foods
www.inspection.gc.ca/food/information-for-consumers/fact-sheets-and-infographics/date-labelling/eng/1332357469487/1332357545633



BC Centre for Disease Control
An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority