

Handling Leftovers Safely

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Whether cooking at home or eating out, we often have leftover food. Safe handling of leftovers will help prevent foodborne illness.

Cooking meat and poultry safely

If you want leftovers that are safe to eat, make sure that you have cooked them safely to begin with. Always remember to use a food thermometer to make sure the food is cooked to a safe, minimum internal temperature.

Follow these tips for safe cooking of meat and poultry.

- Cook all raw beef, pork, lamb, and veal steaks, chops and roasts to a minimum internal temperature of 145 °F. (You may cook meat to higher temperatures for personal preference.)
- Allow meat to rest for at least 3 minutes before carving or consuming.
- Cook all raw ground beef, pork, lamb and veal to an internal temperature of 160 °F.
- Cook all poultry to an internal temperature of 165 °F.

Keeping food out of the “Danger Zone”

Bacteria grow rapidly in the “Danger Zone” between the temperatures of 40 °F and 140 °F. After food is safely cooked, follow these guidelines to keep leftovers out of the danger zone.

- Keep hot food at 140 °F or warmer to prevent bacterial growth.

- Refrigerate leftovers within two hours of being cooked.
- Throw away all perishable food that has been sitting out for two hours or longer at room temperature or one hour if the temperature is 90 °F or above.
- Keep cold perishable food items such as chicken salad or deli meats at 40 °F or below.
- Keep food cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice or use small serving trays and replace them often.

Cooling food rapidly

Remember to cool food quickly so it reaches the safe refrigerator storage temperature of 40 °F or below. To allow foods to cool rapidly:

- Divide large amounts of food into small, shallow containers.
- Cut large food items such as whole hams into smaller portions.
- Cut items such as turkey breast into smaller pieces and refrigerate, but you may keep legs and wings whole.
- Place hot food in the refrigerator, or chill quickly in an ice- or cold-water bath.



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Wrapping and storing leftovers safely

Wrapping and storing leftovers properly will help keep out bacteria while making the food quality superior. To wrap and store leftovers safely:

- Cover up leftovers, using airtight packaging, or sealing them into storage containers.
- Leave leftovers in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days or frozen for 3 to 4 months.

Thawing frozen leftovers safely

You can thaw frozen leftovers safely in the refrigerator, in cold water or in a microwave oven.

- Refrigerator thawing takes the most time but ensures the food is safe throughout the process. After thawing, use the food within 3 to 4 days or refreeze.
- Cold water thawing takes less time than refrigerator thawing but requires more attention. When using this method, place frozen leftovers in a leak-proof package or plastic bag, changing water every 30 minutes. Cook foods thawed by the cold-water method before refreezing.
- Microwave thawing is the fastest method. Using the microwave method, continue to heat food until it reaches 165 °F.

Reheating leftovers without thawing

It is safe to reheat frozen leftovers without thawing; however, reheating will take longer if food is not thawed first.

Reheating leftovers safely

When reheating leftovers:

- Make sure they reach 165 °F.
- Reheat soups, sauces and gravies to a rolling boil.
- Cover the leftovers to keep in moisture, making sure the food gets heated all the way through.

When reheating in the microwave:

- Cover and rotate food for even heating.
- Use all microwave-safe items when reheating food.
- Allow resting time before checking the internal temperature in several places with a food thermometer.

Refreezing previously frozen leftovers

- If you have leftovers of leftovers, you can safely refreeze the food remaining after reheating it to 165 °F.
- If you froze a large container of leftovers, but now you need only a portion of it, you may safely thaw the leftovers in the refrigerator, take out the portion you need and refreeze the remainder.

Reference

U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2020, July 31). *Leftovers and food safety*. (Rev. ed.).

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/leftovers-and-food-safety>

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www.msue.msu.edu/safefood.

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