

Food Safety Concerns for Our Golden Years

When disease-causing bacteria, viruses, or parasites (germs) contaminate food, they can cause foodborne illnesses, often called food poisoning. While the food supply in the United States is among the safest in the world, it can still be a source of infection. People 65 and older are at a higher risk for hospitalization and death from foodborne illness. According to the CDC, approximately 50% of seniors with confirmed infections with Salmonella, Listeria, and E. coli. are hospitalized.

This increased risk is because organs and body systems change as the body ages, and the immune system declines. The digestive system holds food longer, allowing bacteria to grow while the stomach may not produce enough acid to limit the number of intestinal bacteria. Aging liver and kidneys may not properly rid the body of foreign bacteria and toxins. Between 50 and 60, the immune system in most people begins to decline.

Foodborne illness can be dangerous but is often easy to prevent. By following the basic rules of food safety. Key Food Safety Rules (4 Cs) Clean, Cross-Contamination, Cook, and Chill.

Clean: Wash Hands, Utensils, and Surfaces Often: Germs that can make you sick can survive in many places around your kitchen, including your food, hands, utensils, cutting boards, and countertops. Start with Washing your hands with plain soap and water. Scrub back of your hands, between fingers and under your nails for at least 20 seconds. Wash your hands often, especially during key times when germs can spread. Before, during, and after preparing food. After handling raw meat, poultry, seafood, or uncooked eggs. After using the toilet these are a couple of examples.

Cross Contamination: Prevent cross-contamination by using **separate** cutting boards for raw meat and produce. Replace worn cutting boards. Keep raw meat, poultry, and seafood in a separate, low-shelf area of the fridge. Use separate plates and utensils for cooked and raw foods. Use hot, soapy water to thoroughly wash plates, utensils, and cutting boards that touched raw meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, or flour.

Keep certain types of food separate in your shopping cart, separate raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs from other foods and place these items in individual plastic bags if available. When you check out, place these items in separate bags from other foods. At home, place raw meat, poultry, and seafood in sealed leak proof containers. Freeze them if you're not planning to use them within a few days.

Cook to the Right Temperature: Food is safely cooked when the internal temperature is high enough to kill germs that can make you sick: Use a food thermometer to be sure your food is safe: 145°F for fish/beef/eggs/pork chops, 160°F for ground meats, and 165°F for poultry and leftovers. Check in the thickest part of the food, making sure not to touch bone, fat, or gristle.

Keep food hot (140°F or above) after cooking. ALWAYS keep food out of the temperature danger zone which is between 40°F - 140°F, where germs grow rapidly.

Microwave food thoroughly to 165°F or above. Read package directions for cooking and follow them exactly to make sure food is thoroughly cooked. If the food label says, “Let stand for X minutes after cooking,” follow the directions, letting microwaved food sit allows the food to cook thoroughly as colder areas absorb heat from hotter areas.

Chill: Refrigerate and Freeze Food Properly: Bacteria that cause food poisoning multiply quickest between 40°F and 140°F. Your refrigerator should be set to 40°F or below and consume leftovers within 3–4 days. Freezer should be kept to 0°F or below. Use an appliance thermometer to be sure.

Never leave perishable foods out of refrigeration for more than 2 hours. If the food is exposed to temperatures above 90°F, refrigerate it within 1 hour.

Leftovers should be placed in shallow containers and refrigerated promptly to allow quick cooling. The safest way to thaw or marinate meat, poultry, and seafood is in the refrigerator never on the countertop. **Freezing does not destroy harmful germs, but it does keep food safe until you can cook it. Eat Safely!**

Yummy Pork Chops for Two (allrecipes.com)

- 1 cup Italian-style salad dressing
- 4 Tbsp low sodium Soy sauce
- ¼ Tsp pepper
- 2 pork chops

Mix the Italian dressing with soy sauce and pepper. Place pork chops in a skillet sprayed with cooking oil over medium heat. Pour the dressing mixture over the pork chops. Cover the skillet, cook for 20 to 25 minutes, turning occasionally. Remove cover, reduce heat to low. Cook to internal temperature of 145 degrees. Serve with vegetables and a starch.

References: FDA, USDA, NIH websites on food safety for seniors

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