

Frequently Asked Food Safety Questions

Everyone knows that food safety is a hot topic these days. When foodborne disease outbreaks occur, they make big headlines. Restaurants close, health departments come under close scrutiny, and patrons panic. But foodborne disease can also happen right in your very own kitchen. Most people know to wash their hands before handling food. However, studies have shown that most cooks are not as careful with their food as they think they are. This page is designed to help answer your food safety questions ranging from being a food processor to the home kitchen.

What is the best way to thaw frozen food?

The safest way to thaw frozen food is in the refrigerator – that way, it always stays at or below a safe temperature of 41 degrees Fahrenheit, where bacterial growth is inhibited. This takes some planning, some other safe methods include thawing food under cold running water or as part of the cooking process. You can thaw in the microwave, but plan to cook the food immediately. The important thing is never thaw food at room temperature! Although the center of the food may still be hard, the outside can quickly enter the “danger zone”, between 41 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Pathogens multiply rapidly at these temperatures and may not be fully cooked out of the food.

What causes food poisoning (i.e. foodborne illness)?

Foodborne illness falls into 3 main categories: biological, chemical and physical. Biological causes include the culprits of bacteria, viruses, yeasts & molds, and parasites. Chemical poisonings can occur from a number of sources – contamination from chemicals found in the home or workplace, as well as naturally occurring toxins which are present in some foods, such as mushrooms and fish. Some types of bacteria produce toxins. Physical hazards are usually things found in food which are not supposed to be there, such as bone, toothpicks, glass, metal, band aids, or other foreign objects which may cause injury. By far the biggest cause of foodborne illness is from bacteria and viruses; there are many kinds of bacteria and viruses that can lead to illness. See our “Foodborne Illness” web page at this site for more information.

*If you think that you might have a foodborne illness, please call your doctor and your county health department as soon as possible.

What can I do at home to prevent foodborne illness for my family?

The single most important thing you can all do is to wash your hands! Although this seems like a simple answer, most foodborne illnesses and common colds are passed by unwashed hands. Use warm water, about a teaspoon of soap, and lots of friction. Scrub all surfaces of your hands for 20 seconds, outside the stream of water. Then rinse thoroughly, and dry on a disposable towel. Cloth towels can harbor residual microbes and pass them on to the next person! Wash your hands after activities like taking out trash, housecleaning, handling raw meat, playing with pets, changing a diaper, and especially after using the restroom. Always wash your hands before cooking or eating. Help your children to learn good hand washing practices.

Secondly, cooking food to the right temperature will help to eliminate foodborne illness. Chicken/poultry and stuffed meats or stuffing containing meat should be cooked to 165°F for 15 seconds. This group includes game animals. Ground meat (beef, pork, lamb) and fish should be cooked to 155°F for 15 seconds. Fish, pork, roasts, and shell eggs should be cooked to 145°F.

Lastly, keep your refrigerator between 39-40°F to keep food at 41°F and your freezer at 0°F. You can purchase a thermometer virtually anywhere. You will need 3 thermometers, one for food and two for your refrigerator (cold side/freezer).

Is antibacterial soap better than regular soap? What about instant hand sanitizers?

The benefit from antibacterial soaps is so insignificant that they are not recommended over regular soap. In fact, some scientists worry that they may contribute to the serious problem of antibacterial resistance. It is most important that you wash your hands correctly, rather than using a certain kind of soap. Hand sanitizers can help reduce bacteria on your hands. However, these products have not been shown to be effective against viral or protozoan pathogens and they are not meant to be a substitute for soap!

What should I do if I have a complaint about a restaurant?

If you have a bad experience at a restaurant, you should try to talk to a manager before you leave. Most restaurants want to make your experience enjoyable. If you address the complaint with the management before you leave, you can let them know exactly what happened, where, when, and who was involved. If you are not satisfied with the response you receive or you suspect a larger problem, you should call your county health department. All restaurants, groceries, bars, and retail food vendors are licensed and inspected by the county health departments. Try to call as soon as you can and give as many details as possible. This will help to construct the scene at a later time.

Are restaurant workers required to wear gloves?

Indiana has a two fold approach to this question. First, food handlers are required to wash their hands for 20 seconds before touching any food. Second, food handlers are required to use a utensil, which includes gloves. The list also includes deli tissue, tongs, and other dispensing equipment. Gloves are not required for all food handling activities, but are acceptable as long as good glove hygiene is practiced.

May I manufacture food in my home kitchen?

The Indiana Sanitary Requirements for Food Establishment Act (Indiana Code Title 16-42-5, <http://www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code/title16/ar42/ch5.html>) and the Retail Food Establishment Sanitation Requirements (Title 410 IAC 7-24, under Retail, Laws and Rules at this web site) prohibit sale of foods that are manufactured or processed in the home. Therefore, food you plan to market must be prepared or manufactured in a kitchen or facility separate from your domestic living quarters. As the operator you must submit plans before the operation begins (see Title 410 IAC 7-24-430 and section 431) and then inspected by either the State Department of Health or the local health department.

As a result of legislative changes some home food operations are now legal. Learn more about HEA 1309 at [Home-Based Vendor Undertanding House Enrolled Act \(HEA\) 1309](#).

A separate kitchen or facility that does not open to any living or sleeping quarters may be built in the basement with an entrance leading directly to the outside. A converted garage or building not being used for another purpose may be acceptable. Building codes and zoning laws must also be adhered to. It is best to contact the Wholesale Food Protection Program (317-233-7360) to determine if your particular home design is acceptable, if you are going to wholesale your products. If you are going to sell your products on a retail level (selling directly to the customer) then call your county health department for approval.

What other agencies or laws do I need to be concerned about?

Other state and local agencies regulate areas such as zoning (contact your county/city office), Department of Fire and Building Services (www.in.gov/sema), septic/sewer installation (contact your county health department), and Department of Revenue (www.in.gov/dor). If you are going into a food business where you could incur liability, then insurance should be considered to safeguard against losses from fire, illness and injury.

How often will I be inspected?

Wholesale inspections are based on a risk assessment approach. If you are manufacturing a product that is ready-to-eat, such as salads and sandwiches, particularly those containing meat, fish, or poultry, then inspections are conducted once or twice a year. Other less hazardous operations are inspected less frequently. Complaints received on a firm are given priority and investigated as soon as possible.

Retail establishments are inspected on a risk assessment approach and increase in frequency based on the type and volume of food. The county health departments have jurisdiction over restaurants, convenience stores, and grocery stores that are not on state property. Complaints received on a facility/restaurant are handled by the county health departments, unless the facility is on state property. The Indiana State Department of Health inspects facilities located on state property.

Can a client retain leftover food from a catered function?

The answer is Yes. It is not against The Indiana State Department of Health rules. An important item to remember is that once the food is removed from temperature control you have to either, immediately cool the product(s) to 41 degrees Fahrenheit or consume them within 2 hours. It would be in the best interest of the caterer to have a signed agreement with the client specifying when they release the product to the client that it becomes the clients responsibility to act accordingly.