
Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

KITCHEN GADGETS OFFER FOOD FOR 'THAW-T'

Washington, D.C. — Did you forget to thaw the chicken for tonight's dinner? How are you going to keep the baked bean casserole hot until you get to the tailgate party?

Some products on the market claim to solve mealtime dilemmas by thawing food quickly or storing hot or cold food electronically. Before you buy one of these gadgets, read the ads carefully: some products may not measure up to their claims, and they may even increase the risk of food poisoning.

At issue is the proper storage of perishable foods such as meat, poultry, and fish. Harmful bacteria can grow on foods held at temperatures between 40°F and 140°F — a danger zone that's above refrigeration and below cooking or holding temperatures — and this in turn can lead to food-borne illness. Use of some products like food thawing trays and thermo-electric coolers may involve leaving food at these unsafe temperatures for significant amounts of time.

Advertisements for thawing trays claim that frozen food can be thawed rapidly at room temperature. Some ads claim the trays are made of a special "superconductive" metal that speeds the natural thawing process. Yet most are simple aluminum trays, and the same accelerated thawing effect can be achieved with any metal pan. In fact, thawing times for these trays often are exaggerated in advertisements.

Because thawing trays require that food be thawed at room temperature, and many items will have greatly extended thawing times of well over two hours, there's some risk that harmful bacteria may develop. Generally, food safety experts agree that to avoid that risk, frozen food should be thawed in the refrigerator, in a microwave oven, or in cold water, but never at room temperature.

Other devices, called thermo-electric coolers, also are billed as food warmers. Designed primarily to maintain the temperature of food that was already cool or warm before being placed in the device, these products cannot cool or store food as effectively as a refrigerator, and they often may hold food at unsafe temperatures. Their internal cooling levels vary with outside conditions: use in hot weather, direct sunlight, or enclosed spaces like an unventilated car may raise internal cooling levels beyond safe refrigeration temperatures.

As food warmers, these products generally do not reach the safety threshold of 140°. Indeed, their maximum holding temperature isn't high enough either to kill off existing bacteria or prevent further bacterial growth on food.

For more information about food safety, contact the Meat and Poultry Hotline operated by the United States Department of Agriculture at 1-800-535-4555, or the Seafood Hotline operated by the United States Food and Drug Administration at 1-800-332-4010.

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