



United States Department of Agriculture  
Food Safety and Inspection Service

# Food Safety and Food Security: What Consumers Need to Know



*For nearly a century, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been protecting the Nation's food supply. This long history has allowed USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) to develop the expertise and systems to protect our Nation's supply of meat, poultry, and egg products against intentional and unintentional contamination.*

*With a solid food safety infrastructure in place, FSIS has also been able to focus on strengthening existing programs and improving lines of communication, both internally and externally. Through cooperation with industry, consumers, and other government agencies, FSIS has an extensive system in place that can properly respond to a food security emergency.*

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# USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service

Assuring the safety and security of the food supply is a vital part of FSIS' public health mission. FSIS has more than 7,600 inspectors and veterinarians working in plants with meat, poultry, and egg products and at ports-of-entry every day to prevent, detect, and respond to food safety issues. FSIS also has more than 100 employees across the United States who monitor meat, poultry, and egg products at import facilities, including docks, loading areas, and refrigeration and storage areas. They also monitor the movement of product through distribution channels.



FSIS continues to look for ways to improve food safety. This includes devising the best methods for tracking cases of foodborne illness and identifying outbreaks more quickly. The Agency also aims to make sure that plans for reducing the risks of foodborne illness are based on the best available science and technology, and adjusting the FSIS workforce to support the increasingly science-based and public health-oriented system.

The inspection system implemented in all federally inspected and State-inspected meat and poultry plants nationwide is designed to prevent entry of contaminated product into the food supply, whether the contamination is naturally occurring or intentional. FSIS inspectors and veterinarians routinely look for anything out of the ordinary.

FSIS and USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) coordinate activities to detect animal diseases that could affect human health and prevent any activities that could cripple agricultural production and damage the U.S. economy. Together with the resources of other government agencies at the Federal, State, and local levels, FSIS has an extensive and highly effective system to protect American consumers.

A "one-stop" food safety resource for consumers is available at [www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov). This government Web site serves as a gateway to food safety information for consumers. It contains news and safety alerts, advice for consumers, and a list of food safety agencies and how to contact them.

# What Consumers Need to Know... Handling Food Safely

Consumers should always follow basic safe food handling rules to protect themselves and ensure that the foods they eat are safe. They include:



## **CLEAN: Wash hands and surfaces**

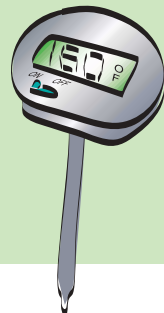
**often.** Keep everything clean while preparing meals. Wash hands and kitchen surfaces often with soap and water. Wash cutting boards, dishes, and utensils after preparing each food item and before going on to the next item. Paper towels are recommended for cleaning up kitchen surfaces.

**SEPARATE: Don't cross-contaminate.** Separate raw meat, poultry, and seafood from other foods when shopping at the grocery store and storing them in your refrigerator. Use one cutting board for raw meat, poultry, and seafood and a separate one for other food. Never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, or seafood unless the plate has been thoroughly cleaned.

**COOK: Cook to safe temperatures.** Use a food thermometer to make sure meat, poultry, and egg dishes are cooked to safe temperatures. Do not second-guess the internal temperature of cooked foods—follow the recommended temperatures in the chart below. Keep hot food hot, 140 °F or above. When reheating, leftovers should be thoroughly heated to 165 °F; sauces and soup should be brought to a rolling boil.

## **TEMPERATURE RULES:**

- 145 °F** Beef, lamb, and veal (steaks and roasts), medium rare (medium—160 °F)
- 160 °F** Ground meats (beef, pork, veal, and lamb), pork (chops, ribs, and roasts), egg dishes
- 165 °F** Ground turkey and chicken, stuffing, casseroles, leftovers
- 170 °F** Chicken and turkey (breasts)
- 180 °F** Chicken & turkey (whole bird, legs, thighs, and wings)



**CHILL: Refrigerate promptly.** Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared food, and leftovers within 2 hours. Place leftovers into shallow containers for rapid cooling. The refrigerator should be maintained at 40 °F or below and the freezer at 0 °F or below. Use an appliance thermometer to check the temperature. Keep cold food cold, 40 °F or below. Never defrost food at room temperature. Thaw food in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or in the microwave. Marinate foods in the refrigerator.

Additionally, consumers buying fresh, packaged, or canned food should always check to be sure the package or can is intact before purchasing. Do not purchase packages that are punctured or appear to have been opened. Follow label advice for products that are packaged with safety seals. Do not consume food if the seal has been broken. For canned goods, do not eat the contents if the cans are dented, cracked, or bulging. These are warning signs that the product may not be safe.

Clean the top of the container before opening. After opening, inspect the product. Do not use products that are discolored, moldy, or have an off odor. Do not use products that spurt liquid or foam when the container is opened. **If you have questions about a product, do not taste the product to determine if it is safe.** Do not use packaged food received in the mail if you don't know where it came from.

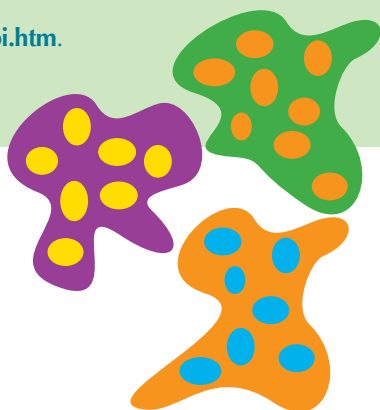
For advice, or if you think a meat or poultry product has made you sick, **call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854); TTY: 1-800-256-7072.** FSIS has a national surveillance system to monitor and track food-related consumer illness or injury complaints. This system is a powerful tool that can detect patterns of illnesses, adulterated food products, or intentional tampering. Information received from the system is used to investigate and identify potentially harmful food products.

If the product does not contain meat or poultry, reports of possible food safety concerns or tampering should be directed to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) at 1-888-SAFE FOOD (1-888-723-3366).

## WHAT CONSUMERS NEED TO KNOW... FOODBORNE ILLNESS

Foodborne illness often shows up as flu-like symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or fever. Each organism may cause different symptoms. Age and physical condition place some persons at higher risk than others for any type of bacteria. Very young children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with compromised immune systems (such as people undergoing cancer treatments, or that have kidney disease, AIDS, diabetes, etc.) are at greatest risk from any harmful bacteria. Some persons may become ill after consuming only a few bacteria; others may remain symptom-free after consuming thousands. Symptoms usually occur between 1 hour and up to 3 weeks after eating contaminated food.

Anyone concerned about an illness should contact a physician. For more detailed information, along with a chart of symptoms associated with foodborne illness, read *Foodborne Illness: What Consumers Need to Know*, at [www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/fact\\_fbi.htm](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/fact_fbi.htm).



# What Consumers Need to Know... Product Recalls

When meat and poultry products are recalled, FSIS notifies the public in two ways—through a press release and a Recall Notification Report (RNR). FSIS distributes the press release to local and national newspapers and television and radio stations so the information can be made available to consumers. Both the press release and RNR are posted on the FSIS Recall Web site: [www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/recalls/rec\\_intr.htm](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/recalls/rec_intr.htm).

The press release and RNR include information that consumers and suppliers can use to identify the product that is being recalled. This information includes:

- a description of the food being recalled;
- any identifying codes, including the plant number, which is located in the USDA Inspection Mark on the label (the number is preceded by either the letters EST for “establishment” or P for “poultry”);
- the reason for the recall;
- the name of the producer;
- distribution information;
- the health risk for the recall; and
- the appropriate contact persons for FSIS and the recalling company.



If you discover that you have a recalled product in your home, do not consume it. Instead, return it to the place of purchase. If you become ill from a recalled product, contact a physician.



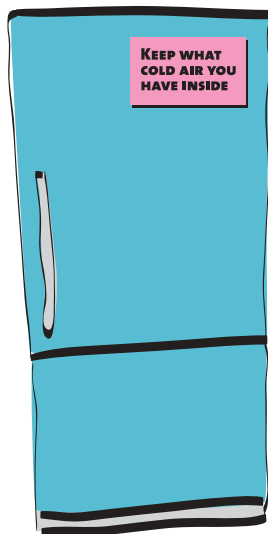
# What Consumers Need to Know ... Keeping Food Safe During Emergencies

There are times when the food you have in your home could become unsafe if not handled properly, such as if there is a power failure. In addition, many organizations, including the American Red Cross and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, encourage consumers to keep a supply of nonperishable food in their homes in case of emergency.



## How Can You Keep Food Safe During a Power Failure?

**Keep the freezer door closed to keep cold air inside.** Don't open the door any more than necessary. A full freezer will stay at safe temperatures about 2 days; a half-full freezer about 1 day. If your freezer is not full, group packages so they form an "igloo" to protect each other. If you think the power will be out for several days, try to find some dry ice. Keep dry ice wrapped and do not touch it with your bare hands. Use cubed ice or block ice in the refrigerator.



**Even if food has started to thaw, foods can be safely kept in the freezer.** The foods in your freezer that partially or completely thaw before power is restored may be safely refrozen if they still contain ice crystals or are 40 °F or below. You will have to evaluate each item separately. *When in doubt, throw it out.*

In general, refrigerated items should be safe up to 4 hours. Keep the door closed as much as possible. Discard any perishable foods (such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and leftovers) that have been above 40 °F for 2 hours or more. Also discard any other food that has an unusual odor, color, or texture, or feels warm to the touch.

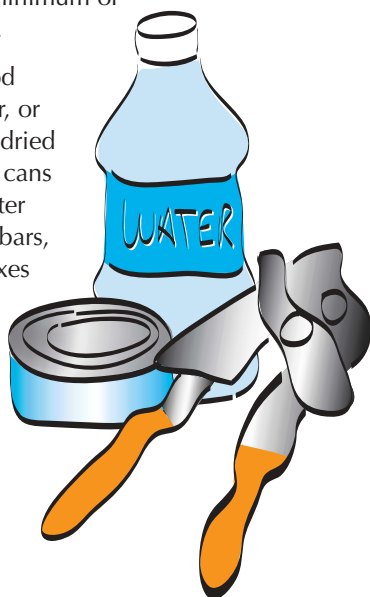
**Keep an appliance thermometer in the refrigerator and freezer at all times.** This will remove the guesswork of just how cold the unit is because it will give you the exact temperature. The key to determining the safety of foods in the refrigerator and freezer is knowing how cold they are. The refrigerator temperature should be at 40 °F or below; the freezer, 0 °F or lower.

More detailed information, along with a chart that tells which foods may be saved and which should be thrown out, may be found in *Keeping Food Safe During an Emergency* at [www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/pofeature.htm](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/pofeature.htm).

## What Food and Water Should You Keep in Your Home?

The American Red Cross and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security recommend the following:

- Keep a supply of nonperishable food and a 3-day supply of commercially bottled water per person (minimum of 3 gallons) on hand in case of an emergency.
- Since there may not be power, purchase food that requires no refrigeration, cooking, water, or special preparation. Good food choices are dried fruit; canned fruit or vegetables; shelf-stable cans of meat, poultry, and fish; jars of peanut butter and jelly; small packages of cereal, granola bars, and crackers; nonfat dry milk; and small boxes of juice drinks. Select small cans of food so



there won't be any leftovers that will need refrigeration. Remember to include infant formula, pet food, and foods for family members with special dietary needs.

- Have a manually operated can opener on hand.
- Periodically use and refresh your supply.

More ideas for foods to keep on hand are available at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov).

## How Long Should Canned Foods Be Kept?

Store canned foods and other shelf-stable products in a cool, dry place. Never put them above the stove, under the sink, in a damp garage or basement, or any place exposed to high or low temperature extremes. Store high-acid foods, such as tomatoes and other fruit, up to 18 months. Low-acid foods, such as meat and vegetables, can be kept 2 to 5 years.

While extremely rare, a toxin produced by *Clostridium botulinum* is the worst danger in canned foods. **NEVER USE** food from containers that show signs of "botulism": leaking, bulging, rusting, or badly dented cans; cracked jars; jars with loose or bulging lids; canned food with a foul odor; or any container that spurts liquid when opening. **DO NOT TASTE THIS FOOD!** Even the tiniest amount of *botulinum* toxin can be deadly.



# What Consumers Need to Know... Keeping the Food Supply Secure



Since the attacks on September 11, 2001, FSIS' commitment to protect America's supply of meat, poultry, and egg products from any form of intentional or unintentional contamination has never been higher.

FSIS inspectors have remained on heightened alert to detect unusual or suspicious activity and seek the assistance of law enforcement agencies when needed. FSIS re-inspects imported meat and poultry products before they are allowed to enter the U.S. food supply. The Agency works with the U.S. Customs Service and other agencies to prevent illegal shipments from coming into the country.

FSIS also works closely with FDA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as well as with State and local health agencies, to coordinate bio-security efforts and share information about illnesses.

In addition, FSIS is conducting food security awareness training for its field workforce. FSIS is strengthening laboratory security and improving their methods for detecting biological and chemical agents and determining their source. FSIS laboratories are part of a nationwide network that would be utilized if intentional acts jeopardized food safety.

FSIS has published guidelines that can be used to improve security measures in plants that produce meat, poultry, and egg products. Guidelines have also been published for transporters and distributors of these products. Private businesses play a vital role in reducing the threat of tampering such as limiting access to food processing areas, checking the safety of ingredients, improving packaging materials to prevent tampering, and securing transportation vehicles.

## What Consumers Need to Know ... Risks of Intentional Contamination

Almost any food, beverage, or other item you ingest could be of some risk. However, safety measures practiced by the food producers, processors, and other foodservice operators and retailers, as well as common sense used by consumers, can greatly reduce the chance of having food used as a weapon to attack our country. Most of the food safety practices already in place apply equally to intentional contamination. If specific, credible threats are received, then USDA, in cooperation with other homeland security agencies, would keep the public informed of measures to take.

Consumers can also play a role by reporting unusual characteristics of meat, poultry, and egg products to their local health agency, the **USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**, or if appropriate, law enforcement.



# What Consumers Need to Know... Reporting Possible Food Tampering



Carefully examine all food product packaging. Be aware of the normal appearance of food containers. That way you'll be more likely to notice if an outer seal or wrapper is missing. Compare a suspect container with others on the shelf.

If you suspect your product has been tampered with, contact your local health department or law enforcement agency. If the food contains meat, poultry, or egg products, you can also **call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)** from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm Eastern Time. After business hours, call the FSIS Technical Service Center's emergency number at 1-800-233-3935. In order to help:

Preserve the evidence. If a portion of the suspect food is available and it is safe to keep it, wrap it securely, mark "DANGER" and freeze it. Save all packaging materials, such as cans, labels or cartons. Write down the food type, the date, other identifying marks on the package, the location and store where the food was purchased, the time consumed, and when symptoms occurred. Save any identical unopened products. Save all purchase receipts.

Seek treatment as necessary. If you become ill and believe your illness is due to a food product, contact your doctor. For victims in an "at-risk" group (the young, elderly, or immuno-compromised), seek medical care immediately. If symptoms persist or become severe (bloody diarrhea, excessive nausea and vomiting, or high temperature), call your doctor immediately.

Call your local health department if the suspect food was served at a large gathering, from a restaurant or other food service facility, or if it is a commercial product.

**Call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)** or E-mail [MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov](mailto:MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov) if the suspect food is a meat or poultry product. For all other food products, notify FDA at 1-888-SAFEFOOD (1-888-723-3366).

## Additional Information

For more information about food safety, visit the World Wide Web at the following sites:

### **Food Safety and Inspection Service**

[www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

### **Gateway to Government Food Safety Information**

[www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov)

### **United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)**

[www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov)

### **Biosecurity Information**

[www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/topics/biosecurity.htm](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/topics/biosecurity.htm)

### **Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service**

[www.aphis.usda.gov](http://www.aphis.usda.gov)

### **United States Department of Homeland Security**

[www.dhs.gov](http://www.dhs.gov)

### **Information on How to Prepare for an Emergency**

[www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)

### **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)**

[www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/bioterrorism.html](http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/bioterrorism.html)

### **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)**

[www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)

### **Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN)**

[www.agctr.lsu.edu/eden/](http://www.agctr.lsu.edu/eden/)

### **National Agricultural Library (NAL)**

[www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/emerg.html](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/emerg.html)

### **American Red Cross**

[www.redcross.org/services/disaster/beprepared/food.html](http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/beprepared/food.html)



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