



FCS-3315

Food safety for older adults

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Introduction

Adults age 65 and older are more likely to get very sick from food poisoning. Food poisoning is caused by harmful germs, such as Salmonella, Listeria and E. coli. A serious illness may lead to a hospital stay or even death.

Why are older adults at higher risk?

- The immune system may not fight germs as well.
- The digestive system may work more slowly.
- The liver and kidneys may not remove harmful substances as well.
- The stomach may make less acid to help kill germs.
- Health problems, such as diabetes or cancer, can raise the risk.
- Some medicines can make it harder for the body to fight illness.

Foods to avoid or handle carefully

Some foods are more likely to carry harmful germs. Choose safer options whenever possible.

Table 1. Foods to avoid or handle carefully.

Food group	Avoid	Choose instead / handle safely
Milk and dairy foods	• Raw or unpasteurized milk • Cheese or other dairy products made with unpasteurized milk	• Pasteurized milk and dairy products • Cheese labeled “made with pasteurized milk”
Eggs	• Raw or undercooked eggs • Foods made with raw eggs (such as some homemade dressings, eggnog, cookie dough or sauces)	• Eggs cooked until both the yolk and white are firm • Pasteurized eggs or egg products for recipes that will not be fully cooked
Meat and poultry	• Raw or undercooked meat or poultry • Raw or undercooked ground meat • Raw or undercooked hot dogs	• Cook meat and poultry to safe internal temperatures • Heat deli meats, lunch meats and hot dogs until steaming hot before eating

Food group	Avoid	Choose instead / handle safely
Fish and seafood	- Raw or undercooked fish or shellfish - Raw oysters, clams or mussels - Refrigerated smoked seafood unless cooked in a dish	- Fish and seafood cooked to a safe internal temperature - Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood
Sprouts and fresh produce	Raw or lightly cooked sprouts (alfalfa, bean, clover or radish sprouts)	- Rinse fruits and vegetables under running water before eating, cutting or cooking - Do not wash produce with soap or bleach - Cut away bruised or damaged areas before use

Table 2. Four key steps to food safety.

Food safety step	What to do
Step 1: Clean	- Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food. - Wash cutting boards, dishes, tools and countertops with hot, soapy water. - Rinse fruits and vegetables under running water. - Use a clean towel or paper towel to dry your hands.
Step 2: Separate	- Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs away from foods that are ready to eat. - Use one cutting board for raw meat and another for fruits, vegetables, bread and other ready-to-eat foods. - Store raw meat, poultry and seafood in a sealed container or bag. - Place raw foods on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so juices cannot drip onto other foods. - Never place cooked food on a plate that holds raw meat unless the plate has been washed.
Step 3: Cook	- Use a food thermometer to make sure the food is fully cooked. - Poultry, casseroles and leftovers: 165 F - Ground beef, pork, lamb and veal: 160 F - Whole cuts of beef, pork, lamb and veal: 145 F, followed by a 3-minute rest - Fish: 145 F - Egg dishes: 160 F - Do not judge safety by the color or look of the food. A food thermometer is the only way to know that food has reached a safe temperature.
Step 4: Chill	- Put perishable food in the refrigerator within two hours. - If the temperature is above 90 F, refrigerate food within 1 hour. - Keep the refrigerator at 40 F or below. - Keep the freezer at 0 F or below. - Thaw food in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave. - Never thaw food on the counter. - Cook food right away after thawing it in cold water or in the microwave.

Safe food storage tips

- Place leftovers in the refrigerator within two hours.
- Divide large amounts of food into small, shallow containers. This helps food cool quickly and evenly.
- Cover leftovers or place them in microwave-safe containers with tight-fitting lids.
 - Glass or food-grade plastic containers are both acceptable.
 - Avoid using margarine tubs, whipped-topping tubs, takeout containers, yogurt cups and similar packages for long-term storing, as these are usually made for one-time use. They may not hold up well after repeated washing, freezing or heating, and can become difficult to clean.
 - Store different foods separately. Keep cooked meats, poultry, seafood and other leftovers in separate containers to help maintain quality and reduce cross-contamination.
- Label containers with the name of the food and the date it was prepared.
- Eat refrigerated leftovers within 3-4 days. Freeze them if they will not be eaten within that time.
- Never taste a leftover to decide whether it is still safe.
- Do not fill the refrigerator too full. Cold air needs room to circulate to keep everything at the right temperature.

Symptoms of foodborne illness

Symptoms may begin within a few hours or several days after eating unsafe food. Common symptoms include:

- Diarrhea
- Stomach pain or cramps
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fever

When to seek medical attention

Because older adults have a higher risk of serious illness, it is important to contact a healthcare provider when symptoms are severe or do not improve. Contact a doctor or seek medical care if you have:

- A fever over 102 F
- Bloody diarrhea
- Diarrhea lasting more than three days
- Severe stomach pain or cramps
- Vomiting so often that you cannot keep liquids down
- Signs of dehydration, such as a dry mouth, very little urine, dizziness or weakness

Get emergency help right away

Call 911 or go to an emergency room if you have:

- Blurry or double vision
- Drooping eyelids
- Trouble speaking or swallowing
- Muscle weakness
- Numbness or tingling
- Trouble breathing

These may be signs of a serious illness, including botulism. Do not wait for the symptoms to go away on their own.

Remember

You cannot always tell whether food is safe by looking at it, smelling it or tasting it. Harmful germs may be present even when the food seems normal. Never taste food to see if it is safe. When in doubt, throw it out.



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