

2019 March Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Preparing Food Safely: Simple Mistakes to Easily Correct

Mistake: Thawing frozen raw meat and poultry on the counter. Why a mistake? Bacteria grow rapidly at room temperature and frozen foods thaw unevenly. USDA recommends thawing in the refrigerator (planning ahead is necessary). Once thawed, foods such as ground meat or turkey should be all right in the refrigerator for an extra day or two before cooking. Quicker option is to thaw in cold water. Put frozen food in a leak-proof bag and submerge food in cold water, changing water every 30 minutes. After thawing, cook food right away. Another option is to thaw in the microwave. Cook immediately after thawing.

Mistake: Rinsing or washing raw poultry prior to cooking. Raw poultry carries *Campylobacter* bacteria and may be contaminated with *Salmonella* and *Clostridium perfringens* (major causes of food poisoning). Giving raw poultry a scrub doesn't get rid of these pathogens. Quite the opposite. They can easily be splashed to sinks and counters. Juice from meat can contaminate a cook's hands, so washing hands throughout food preparation is important.

Mistake: Not paying attention to food recalls. Center for Foodborne Illness Research and Prevention reports people don't hear about a recall or, if they do, they assume the recall is not near them. The Center suggests three rules to follow: (1) Don't assume your area isn't affected: "Companies might say where the food originated and offer identification information like a product code to look for on the packaging, but they aren't required to share where exactly a contaminated product was sold." The onus is on the buyer. (2) Don't ignore a recall just because it's "voluntary". Most food recalls are voluntary. Companies do recalls when there is a real threat to public health. (3) Throw the product out immediately. Discard and wash hands and surfaces.

Mistake: Not washing fruits and vegetables with inedible skins. FDA recommends washing *all* produce (e.g., apples, oranges, avocados, potatoes) before cutting or peeling so there is no transfer of dirt from the skin to the pulp. The exception is prewashed produce, but many people wash this, too. Running water over produce is sufficient. Contamination on fruits and vegetable skins is a real concern. *Listeria monocytogenes* was found on skins of more than 17 percent of the 361 avocado skins tested. Listeriosis is a serious bacterial illness. (Check earlier Health Notes on bacterial infections.)

Mistake: Not using a meat thermometer. Color, smell and taste are not reliable methods of checking readiness of whether food is done. Looking for pink spots in meat to check readiness is not as safe as using a digital tip-sensitive thermometer for meat and poultry to test for "doneness." [Foodsafety.gov](http://foodsafety.gov) maintains a list of safe minimum cooking temperatures.

Mistake: Skipping washing hands and food surfaces between food preparation stages. When preparing raw meat or poultry, it is important to wash hands every time one comes into contact with meat or poultry. It is important to prevent cross-contamination. Suggestion: scrub hands together with soap and water for at least 20 seconds while humming "Happy Birthday". Clean surfaces thoroughly and consider using a separate cutting board for meat/poultry/fish. Replace or sanitize sponges (one minute in microwave) and cleaning cloths often.

Mistake: Not separating raw meat from other produce, starting at grocery store and ending in refrigerator! Bacteria from raw poultry products can transfer to packaging via meat juice. Separating meat products from other produce and grocery items can prevent cross-contamination. Avoid licking fingers when trying to open plastic bags to insert meat products or other produce after taking them off shelves. Food storage habits at home (e.g., putting package of meat on kitchen counter without a protective bag) can contribute to cross-contamination, even when handled safely in the grocery store. Ready to eat food should be separated from uncooked eggs, uncooked meat, and uncooked seafood when placing them in grocery cart and when bagged at grocery checkout!

Mistake: Leaving food out too long after cooking or eating. Food safety experts suggest food should never be left out for more than two hours. In other words, refrigerate food ASAP! [Foodsafety.gov](http://foodsafety.gov) recommends heating leftovers to a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees.

<https://www.foodsafety.gov/> (check out Tips for Meal Kit and Food Delivery Safety Jan 2019)

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/wellness/8-surprising-food-safety-mistakes-you-might-be-making/ar-BBS7o7G?ocid=spartandhp>