



nz nutrition
FOUNDATION

Committee for Healthy Ageing
Bulletin No 27, September 2016

Welcome to Issue 27 of our Bulletin, updating you on issues of importance or topical interest relating to nutrition and physical activity of older people. In this issue we have a closer and practical look at food safety. As people age, they can be more vulnerable to food poisoning, and some tips to keep safe are highlighted here.

FOOD SAFETY FOR SENIORS

As we assemble this e-Bulletin, we are hearing news of the water-borne pathogen affecting many people in Havelock North in Hawke's Bay. Schools have closed, there has been a death, and those at high risk of this very contagious bug include the very young and the very old; those whose immunity is weakest. People are being warned to be extra-vigilant with regard to the use of water, and advised to boil it for everything, including cooking, dishwashing and cleaning teeth.

It's not often we hear of bacterial pathogens on this scale in New Zealand, but it serves as a pertinent reminder that it does happen. We can do much to ensure that we keep ourselves safe from food-borne illnesses.

As we age, our ability to fight back against dangerous bacteria that may invade our systems reduces. Our immune systems become weaker and less able to protect us from food poisoning. For people with chronic diseases such as diabetes, kidney disease and some cancer treatments, it may be even more difficult to fight off these infections. As well, stomach acid decreases as we age, and stomach acid plays an important role in reducing the number of bacteria in our gut, and the risk of disease. Not only that, but the digestive process slows with age, allowing food poisoning bacteria more time to grow and form toxins or poisons in the gut.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". Preventing food-borne illness or food poisoning is far better than contracting it and having to recover. The signs of food poisoning range from an upset stomach and stomach cramps, diarrhoea, fever, vomiting, and dehydration. In extreme cases, death may occur.

One of the problems with food poisoning is that you often cannot tell if a food is safe or not. It may look good, smell good and even taste good. Even if there is an obvious change in smell or appearance, and your eyesight or sense of smell has diminished, you may not pick up any tell-tale signs. So knowing that it has been properly looked after throughout the process right through to getting it onto your plate is reassuring.

It's important to think about food safety when you purchase, prepare, cook, store and reheat food.

FOOD SAFETY TIPS FOR OLDER PEOPLE

Shopping

- Buy cold or frozen foods at the end of your shopping trip. A chilly bin or insulated bag to transport these items is a good idea if you are some time or distance from home.
- Check the 'use by' or 'best before' dates.
 - If a food has passed its 'use by' date, don't buy it or eat it. The 'use by' date is the date before which the food should be safe to eat.

- The 'best before' date does not mean the food is unsafe after this date, but that the quality may not be as good. 'Best before' foods are safe to eat if properly handled.
- Don't buy fruits and vegetables that are bruised or damaged – check them. Such produce spoils more quickly when you get it home.
- Make sure raw and cooked or ready-to-eat foods are packed separately to avoid cross-contamination from the raw product, especially raw meat, fish and seafood, poultry.

Storing food

- Unpack and store your food shopping, especially perishable foods, as soon as possible.
- Your fridge should be set at 2-4°C; and your freezer at minus -15 to -18°C. Fridge thermometers are available from some hardware and kitchen or homeware stores.
- Put raw meat, poultry, fish and seafood in sealed containers or plastic bags on the bottom shelf of the fridge, so that juices from the raw product do not drip onto other foods. If you are not planning to eat these products within 3-4 days, freeze them immediately.
- Store cut fruits, leafy, green and tender vegetables in the fridge. Hard vegetables, such as potatoes, whole pumpkin, kumara, carrots can be stored in a cool dry place. Some foods spoil if refrigerated – so do not refrigerate:
 - kumara, as discolouration and breakdown of the flesh will occur.
 - bananas, as they will go black.
 - tomatoes, as they tend to go 'squishy' as the tender cells break down.
- Store fresh milk and milk products in the fridge. Long life alternatives and milk powder can be stored in the pantry cupboard and only refrigerated after opening.

Defrosting food

- Defrost raw meat, poultry fish and seafood in the fridge (allow 24 hours), microwave, or in a sealed bag or container submerged in cold water.
- If you use the microwave, cook the food immediately after thawing
- Do not refreeze thawed food.

Preparing food

- Prepare food as close to cooking time as possible
- Make sure all preparation equipment – knives, boards etc. – are scrupulously clean.
- Wash your hands thoroughly before starting to prepare food, and between preparing raw foods and foods that will not be cooked before eating, e.g. salads
- Thoroughly wash foods that will be eaten without further cooking, e.g. raw vegetables and fruits.
- If possible, have separate cutting boards for raw foods, especially raw meat, poultry, fish and seafood, and ready-to-eat foods. Alternatively, wash boards thoroughly – in the dishwasher if possible – between preparing raw foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- If you prepare food ahead of time, keep it refrigerated until it is time to cook it. (It should be held at room temperature for no longer than 2 hours)
- Keep your preparation area clean – clean as you go.

Cooking food

- Ideally, if you have a food thermometer, you can check the food for doneness by checking the temperature. Food is safe when the internal temperature reaches 70°C.
- Meat is done when it is pink (rare) inside, but not bloody.
- Check for doneness of poultry and pork by ensuring juices run clear.
- Fish should flake readily when cooked.
- Pre-cook minced meat, sausages and poultry before barbecuing.

Holding food – the 2-hour rule

- If you cook food, and do not eat it immediately, or within 2 hours, it should be refrigerated within 30 minutes and reheated when required. Keeping cooked food hot in the oven for too long spoils the taste, and quality deteriorates as well.
- Cold food should be held in a refrigerator until it is needed. It should not be held at room temperature for extended periods of time – no more than 2 hours.

Dealing with leftovers

- Cover and refrigerate leftovers as soon as possible after cooking (within 2 hours).
- Eat leftover foods within 2-4 days. If you do not plan to do this, freeze the leftovers
- When reheating leftovers, make sure they are cooked to piping hot through to the centre, or for liquid foods like soups, gravies or sauces, bring them to a rolling boil before eating.
- Don't reheat the same leftovers more than once.
- If you are cooking enough food to allow for meals for another day, serve these meals at the same time that you serve the one you're about to eat, cover it and refrigerate or freeze, depending on when you plan to eat it – freeze if more than 2-4 days.
- When freezing meals, it's easier to manage if you've done this as single or one meal portions.

Cleaning up

- Keep the sink and kitchen benches clean, especially after they have been in contact with raw meat, poultry, fish and seafood.
- Wash utensils in the dishwasher, or in hot soapy water. Allow to air dry.
- Use the dishwasher for dinnerware, glassware and cutlery if possible, as this will reach hotter temperatures than hand washing, for thorough cleaning and sanitising.
- If you use tea towels, change them often – allowing dirty tea towels to dry and then re-using them can create a food poisoning opportunity as the tea towel gets wet again.
- Change your dishcloth daily, and use paper towels to wipe kitchen surfaces.

Brought-in meals

Hot or cold ready-prepared meals are perishable and can cause illness when not handled correctly.

- **Meals delivered hot**, such as Meals on Wheels, restaurant delivery or pick-up services, or items bought at the supermarket, such as hot cooked chicken need to be kept hot and consumed as soon as possible (at least within 2 hours) after delivery.
- If you choose to hold a meal that is delivered hot, refrigerate it, and reheat in the microwave when you are ready to eat. Do not leave it out on the bench at room temperature.
- **Meals delivered or purchased cold** should be kept chilled until you are ready to eat. Then heat until piping hot, or according to the directions provided by the supplier.
- **Long-life chilled foods** are increasingly available, often in pouches. These include soups, pasta sauces, etc. Keep these foods refrigerated – they do not require freezing – and consume before the ‘use by’ date. Depending on the product, this may be 30-45 days.
- **Frozen meals** may be purchased at supermarkets, or home prepared. Keep frozen until required, thaw and reheat as soon as possible, or reheat according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Do not refreeze thawed meals.

Eating out

Restaurants and cafés must abide by the Food Act and are required to have food control plans that have been designed to mitigate the risks of food poisoning.

- When you eat out, look to see how clean things are: the premises, the staff, and the tables and settings. If you have any doubts, don’t stay!
- Ensure your hot meal is hot. It’s even better if it’s served on a hot plate.
- There are some high risk foods that older people with compromised immune systems should avoid, including raw seafood, undercooked or raw eggs. It’s best to ensure that these items are cooked to a safe temperature, or avoided if this is not possible.

Doggie bags

Often you cannot eat the quantity of food served to you at a restaurant or café. It’s common practice to ask for a ‘doggie bag’ to take the leftovers home to eat later.

- Take care when handling these leftovers. They should be refrigerated within 2 hours of being cooked, so do not take them if you are not planning to go straight home.
- Reheat the food until it is piping hot through to the centre before eating it.

Some places providing meals to older people do not allow leftover food to be taken away because of the risk of food poisoning if the food is not handled correctly. Don’t be offended if you come across this – it’s for your own safety!

A final point

As you age, your immunity reduces, especially when you are unwell or frail. This means you may be less resistant to the food poisoning bug called *Listeria monocytogenes*. This is widespread in the environment, including in soil, vegetation, water and sewage. It can cause a serious invasive illness, or a non-invasive gastro-enteritis. The thing that is different about this bug compared with most others, is that it grows in refrigerated conditions. Cooking will kill the bug, but there are some guidelines that may be useful if you are concerned.

- Avoid eating long-life cold cuts (e.g. ham), raw seafood, unpasteurised dairy products and soft cheeses.

- Avoid eating commercially prepared salads and patés. Freshly prepared and home-made should be OK.
- Avoid foods containing raw eggs, such as home-made mayonnaise, mousse, egg nog, etc.
- Avoid eating uncooked saveloys or cherrios – they must be cooked piping hot.
- Avoid eating raw sprouts; these are especially hard to clean thoroughly.
- Canned foods, dry goods and freshly cooked foods are safe.

Should you eat ham sandwiches? It really depends on your level of risk. If you are concerned, you may be better to choose a meat you've cooked yourself – such as corned beef, chicken, or other protein fillings, such as canned salmon, sardines or tuna, egg or grated cheese mixed with a shelf-stable dressing.

For more information, go to: <http://www.mpi.govt.nz/food-safety>