Food safety facts

Ever wondered if that mouldy piece of cheese is ok to eat or if you should replace your wooden chopping board with plastic? *Consumer Choice* clarifies a few misunderstood food safety notions.

AT A **GLANCE**

Food toxins.

Prevent bacteria growth.

Food safety.

Bacteria, viruses and parasites can cause food-borne illness. The bacteria most commonly implicated are *Campylobacter*, *E. coli* and *Salmonella*. Consumer awareness of food safety practices in the home is vital to increase the number of averted cases. To keep food safe, microorganisms must be stopped from multiplying. Four steps are at the basis of food safety at home:

- **Clean** preparation surfaces and wash hands often.
- **Separate** raw and cooked food to avoid cross contamination.
- **Cook** at correct cooking temperatures to help kill bacteria.
- **Chill** refrigerated food as soon as possible.

We explain some of the more confusing details of food safety, while also clarifying a few general issues.

Cheese

"Mouldy cheese is ok to eat"

Some types of cheese, such as blue cheese and brie, naturally have mould. These kinds of cheeses have specific kinds of mould that are suitable for consumption. However, vulnerable groups such as the elderly, pregnant women and those with lowered immune systems should avoid cheeses that have been ripened with moulds.

When the mould grows by itself, it's hard to know what kind it is. Some produce harmful mycotoxins that penetrate the food. Even if you remove the mould, toxins could still be present. If the cheese is very mouldy, bin it, but if you can cut away a 1cm chunk around the mould it should be ok. The same rules apply to other mouldy foods, such as bread, jam, fruit or vegetables.

"Don't wrap cheese in cling film"

Some say cheese shouldn't be wrapped in cling film because it needs to breathe, but if it's left uncovered it will dry out. Cling film can react with fatty foods causing them to take on its taste, and this can occur with some cheeses. Only use cling film if the box states it is suitable for high fat foods.

Cooking

"Don't wash your chicken or turkey before cooking"

Poultry can be a source of several types of bacteria. Rinsing can wash these from the surface of the bird, but it increases the risk of cross contamination, as germs are easily spread by splashing nearby worktops and kitchen crockery. Cooking will destroy the bacteria anyway, provided you cook it properly.

"It's ok to eat a rare steak but not a rare sausage"

Some meats, such as steak, or whole joints of beef or lamb, can be eaten when still a bit pink in the middle. Bacteria live on the outer surface of the meat, and so are killed when the meat is cooked on the outside or 'sealed'. Some groups, such as young children, the elderly and pregnant women should avoid rare meat altogether.

Meat products, such as burgers, sausages, rolled joints, minced meat or anything skewered such as kebabs must be piping hot right through, as processing meat can distribute bacteria throughout.

Even through poultry may not be processed, it must also be cooked through, as it can harbour bacteria such as *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella*. Pork

can also contain bacteria and parasites if not cooked through.

Eggs

"Runny eggs are ok in some cases"
Eating soft eggs does increase food poisoning risk, but only if bacteria are present. Cooking eggs until the yolk and white is solid should kill any bacteria present. Babies, toddlers, pregnant women and the elderly should avoid soft eggs. These groups can be affected more seriously if they become ill.

"Cracked eggs should be thrown away"
Bacteria such as Salmonella are mostly on the egg shell. If an egg is cracked its easier for the bacteria to get into the interior. Damaged eggs should be discarded.

"Sink or swim freshness test"
Submerging an egg in a bowl of water and observing if it sinks or swims is a traditional trick to test freshness. Eggs naturally have a small air pocket and the older the egg, the bigger the air pocket gets causing the egg to float. It isn't the most reliable test. You'd be better off observing the best before date.

Leftovers

"Reheated rice is a haven for bacteria"
Rice can contain bacterial spores (*Bacillus cereus*) which may not be destroyed by cooking. If rice is left at room temperature the spores can germinate into bacteria that produce toxins. While the bacteria should be destroyed when rice is reheated, the toxins are not and can lead to food poisoning. Refrigerate rice as soon as possible after it cools (put it in a shallow container to speed up cooling), and only keep for one day.

"Leftovers will last two or three days in the fridge"
You should keep leftovers for a maximum of three days before eating. But if in doubt about the smell or look of leftovers, throw them out.

Leftovers don't need to be frozen on the day of cooking, but can be frozen up to day three. Once thawed, they should be eaten immediately.

"Only reheat leftovers once"
Bacteria multiply as food cools. Refrigerating and freezing foods will not kill bacteria, but only stop them multiplying. Cooking kills bacteria, but cooling and reheating food numerous times increases the risk of larger numbers of bacteria being present.

"Wait for food to cool before refrigerating"
We are advised to put leftovers in the fridge as soon as they are cool, preferably within two hours. Some foods, such as large cuts of meat, take longer to cool. Putting warm food in the fridge raises the fridge's temperature, putting all the contents at risk. The ideal fridge temperature should be less than 4°C.

In the kitchen

"Wooden chopping boards harbour more bacteria than plastic"
Germs have been said to live in the pores of wooden chopping boards, but don't worry about the material your chopping board is made from, once you wash it well with hot soapy water and dry it properly. It's also a good idea to put chopping boards through the dishwasher, as high temperature washes will kill more bacteria.

"Damp dish cloths are a germ paradise"
When we wipe surfaces clean where meat has oozed its juices or an egg has dripped as we cracked it, germs can potentially take up residence in the cloth. Bacteria need moisture to grow and a damp dish cloth in a warm kitchen is an ideal environment. So keep cloths for specific purposes, keep them clean and dry and change them regularly.

Packaging

"Don't store food in open tin cans"
Tin cans often have a low concentration of tin, but are coated with other substances that begin to corrode when the can is opened and in contact with the air. This means that food stored in open tin cans has a higher contamination. risk. It's better to transfer the food to a resealable container and refrigerate.

"Don't re-use plastic water bottles"
Water bottles are not manufactured with the intention of re-use. They are fine to re-use once or twice, but are difficult to clean. Most are made from PET plastic, which is not thought to leach into foods, but if they are washed in hot water it can cause the plastic to deteriorate.

Vegetables

"Some beans contain harmful toxins"
This is only a concern if preparing dried beans. Most beans contain natural toxins called lectins. Some have higher concentrations than others, with kidney beans having the greatest. Dried beans should be soaked for at least 8 hours to make them digestible. The beans should then be rinsed and boiled vigorously in fresh water for at least 10 minutes. After this the cooking water should be discarded to remove the toxins. Overall, they need to be cooked for longer until they are soft enough to eat, usually about an hour.

"Sprouts can harbour *E coli* and *Salmonella*"
It's not just raw food enthusiasts who have taken to eating sprouts such as alfalfa and mung beans, but their ideal growing conditions of heat and damp are also the preferred conditions for bacteria. If sprouting your own at home, they must be rinsed twice daily. If shop bought, like all other foods, don't eat after the use by date. Avoid eating them if they don't look and smell fresh. Keep them in the fridge and rinse before use.

"Don't store raw potatoes in the fridge"
Spuds should be kept in a cool dry place, but not in the fridge, as this can lead to higher levels of the natural toxin acrylamide. Once cooked, potatoes can be safely refrigerated for a day or two.

Useful contacts

Food Safety Authority of Ireland
Abbey Court
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1
Advice 1890 336 677
tel (01) 817 1300
fax (01) 817 1301
email info@fsai.ie
www.fsai.ie

***Safe*food**
Block B
Abbey Court
Lower Abbey Street
Dublin 1
Helpdesk 1850 404 567
tel (01) 448 0600
fax (01) 448 0699
www.safefood.eu

CORRECTIONS

Consumer Choice would like to apologise for the following two errors in the January 2009 issue.

- **Tax Guide 2009** (January 2009, p14) In two of our four tax profiles, we incorrectly marked the personal income tax bands. While this did not affect the end calculation of net income tax for the profiles, 2009 tax bands for the single professional and the professional couple are in the 2008 column and vice versa.
- **Our daily bread** (January 2009, p21) In our table, we wrongly reported that Irish Pride's Big Toast Brown 800g loaf contains 2.5g salt per 100g. The correct figure is 1g per 100g which would rate a 'medium', rather than a 'high' salt rating.

Report by
Aisling Murtagh CC