

Food Safety

For patients having chemotherapy or radiation therapy

Follow these guidelines to lower your risk for foodborne illness. Also see the handout “Diet Guidelines for Immunosuppressed Patients” at https://healthonline.washington.edu/document/health_online/pdf/Diet-Guidelines-Immunosuppressed-Patients.pdf.

What is foodborne illness?

Foodborne illness is also called food poisoning. It is any illness caused by eating a food that is contaminated with a virus, bacteria, mold, or parasite, such as *E. coli*, *salmonella*, and *listeria*. Foodborne illness may come from food that is:

- Not handled properly
- Prepared on a surface that is contaminated
- Already contaminated

Why is food safety so important?

Bacteria and other organisms are often found in foods. Most of these are not a problem for a healthy person. But, if you are having chemotherapy or radiation therapy, you have a higher risk of getting infections, including foodborne illness.

If you have any questions about food safety, please ask your nurse to set up an appointment for you with a registered dietitian (RD).

Steps to Food Safety

- Wash your hands and surfaces often when you are preparing food.
- Do not mix raw and ready-to-eat foods while you are preparing meals or snacks.
- Keep foods at safe temperatures. Keep hot foods hotter than 140°F (60°C), and cold foods below 40°F (4.4°C).



Wash your hands and surfaces often when you are preparing food.



Bleach Solution

- Mix $\frac{1}{3}$ cup unscented household bleach with $3\frac{1}{2}$ cups water.
- Keep the solution in a spray bottle.
- Use the solution to clean and sanitize kitchen counters, cutting boards, and other surfaces.
- Remake your bleach solution every day.

Tools for Food Safety

Have these tools on hand in your kitchen:

- Food thermometer
- Refrigerator thermometer
- Hand soap
- Clean towels (cloth or paper)
- Bleach solution to clean surfaces, utensils, knives, and cookware (see box on the left side of this page)

Wash Your Hands and Surfaces Often

- Wash your hands often with soap and warm, running water. Use a rubbing motion for at least 15 seconds:
 - Before and after you prepare food
 - Before you eat
 - After you use the restroom, handle garbage, or touch a pet
- Clean kitchen sponges every day, using one of these methods:
 - Soak them in the bleach solution for 5 minutes
 - Heat them in a microwave on high for 1 minute
 - Run them through the dishwasher

Avoid Contamination

At the Grocery Store

- Do not buy unpasteurized products. This includes some juice, milk, yogurt, pickles, and cheese (such as *queso fresco* or Camembert).
- Do not taste food samples from open containers.
- Check eggs before you buy them. Do not buy or use cracked eggs.
- If your recipe calls for uncooked eggs, make sure the eggs you buy are pasteurized. Consider buying pasteurized eggs, pasteurized powdered egg whites, or liquid pasteurized egg products (such as Eggbeaters).
- Place raw meat, poultry, and fish in separate plastic bags. Keep these bags apart from each other and other food items.

At Home

- Store raw meat apart from ready-to-eat foods. Place meat on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so that meat juice does not drip onto other foods and contaminate them.

- Use a clean knife for each type of food. For example, use one knife for cutting meat, a different knife for chopping produce, and another knife for slicing bread.
- While you are preparing food:
 - Do not taste the food with the same utensil you are using for stirring.
 - Use a clean utensil each time you taste food.
 - Throw away any food that falls on the floor, even if it has only been on the floor a few seconds.
- Air-dry dishes after cleaning. Do not dry them with a towel.
- When grilling or cooking meat, always place the cooked meat on a clean plate. Do not reuse the plate that the raw meat was on.

Fruits and Vegetables

All fresh produce may carry bacteria or other germs that can cause foodborne illness. When a food is labeled “natural” or “organic,” it means the food was grown without using chemical fertilizers or pesticides. It does not always mean that the food is clean or safe.

Use these guidelines for handling all raw produce:

- Rinse produce well under **clean, running water** just before you use it. This includes produce that will be cooked or peeled, such as bananas, melons, and oranges.
- Do **not** wash fruits and vegetables with soaps, detergents, or chlorine bleach solutions. The food can absorb these cleaners, and running water works just as well to remove bacteria.
- Do not buy produce that is already cut, such as melon halves.
- Use a clean vegetable scrubber to clean produce that has:
 - A thick, rough skin or rind, such as melon or potatoes
 - Dirt on the surface
- Rinse leafy vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, and cabbage under running water. Wash one leaf at a time. Wash packaged salad, slaw mixes, and other prepared produce, even if the label says they are pre-washed. You may use a salad spinner or colander for drying.
- Do not eat any raw vegetable sprouts due to high risk of *salmonella* and *E. coli* contamination. This includes alfalfa sprouts, clover sprouts, and mung bean sprouts. It is OK to eat cooked bean sprouts.
- Throw away fruit and vegetables that are slimy or have mold.

Cutting Boards

- Use different cutting boards for raw meat and animal products, produce, and bread. To keep it simple, try using different colored cutting boards for different foods, such as red for meat, green for produce, and yellow for bread. Use glass or plastic cutting boards for ready-to-eat foods.
- It is OK to use wooden cutting boards if they are used **only** for raw meat and poultry.
- Wash cutting boards with hot, soapy water after each use. Let them air dry. Non-porous materials such as acrylic, plastic, or glass and solid wood boards can be washed in a dishwasher. Laminated boards may crack or split if washed in a dishwasher.

Food Storage

- Check expiration dates. Do not use foods that are past their expiration dates. These include fresh meats, poultry, seafood, dairy products, eggs, cereals, canned goods, and more.
- Keep all food storage areas clean.

Keep Foods at Safe Temperatures

Refrigeration

- Keep your refrigerator temperature between 34° and 40°F (between 1.1° and 4.4°C).
- Keep your freezer temperature between 0° and 2°F (between -17.8° and -16.7°C).
- Thaw and marinate foods in the refrigerator. Never leave them on the counter or at room temperature.
- Store and thaw meat, fish, and poultry on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. Do not store raw fruits and vegetables nearby.
- Cook defrosted meat right away. Do not refreeze it.
- Cool hot foods in shallow dishes in the refrigerator. Cover storage containers tightly after the food has cooled.
- Throw away or freeze all prepared foods and leftovers within 72 hours (3 days). Use labels or masking tape to write dates on the containers.
- Never taste food that looks or smells strange.

Cook Foods Well

- Use a thermometer to test if food is heated to the right temperature.

- Cook meat until it is no longer pink and the juices run clear. These are signs that the meat *may be* cooked to the right temperature. But, the only way to be sure that the meat has been cooked to the right temperature is to check it with a thermometer.
- Before eating hot dogs, luncheon meats, cold cuts, or deli-style meats, heat them in the microwave to 165°F (73.9°C), or until they are steaming.
- Do not eat foods that contain raw or undercooked eggs. This includes soft boiled eggs, raw cookie dough, cake batter, and salad dressings.
- Keep foods at safe temperatures:
 - Keep hot food above 140°F (60°C).
 - Keep cold food below 40°F (4.4°C).
- If you are heating food in a microwave:
 - If the microwave does not rotate the food during cooking, pause the cooking once or twice and turn the dish a quarter or half-turn.
 - Stir food several times during cooking.

Eating Out Safely

- Ask your server how fresh food is prepared and held before it is served. For example, a hamburger should be fresh off the grill, not kept warm under a heat lamp.
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables when eating out. Eat these foods at home where you can control how they are prepared and stored.
- Do **not** use self-serve condiment containers. This includes salsa, catsup, mustard, pickles, and others. Ask for small sealed condiment packages instead.
- If you want to take your leftovers home, ask your server to bring you a box so you can pack it yourself. Refrigerate the food as soon as you can.
- Avoid eating foods from salad bars, delicatessens, buffets, potlucks, smorgasbords, food trucks, and sidewalk vendors.

Water Safety

Tap Water

Water from your home faucet is usually safe, if the water is from a city water supply or a city well that serves a lot of people.

Well Water

- Do **not** use well water from private or small community wells. This water must be tested daily and found to be clear of *coliforms* and *Cryptosporidium* organisms. We advise using other approved water sources instead, such as boiled water or bottled water (see page 6).
- City wells that serve a lot of people are OK. This water is tested for bacteria at least twice a day.
- Do **not** drink water from home filtering systems (Brita or Pur), drink water or use ice that is dispensed from the refrigerator, or use ice machines. These sources do not remove bacteria or viruses.
- Well water is OK if it is chlorinated using guidelines from your local health department, **and** if it is treated in one of these ways:
 - Reverse osmosis
 - Distillation
 - Filtered through an absolute 1 micron or smaller filter (NSF Standard #53 for cyst removal)

Safe Water Sources

We suggest using these sources of water if your water is not from a city water or city well supply:

- **Boiled water:** Bring water to a rolling boil for at least 15 to 20 minutes. Store the boiled, cooled water in a clean, covered container for up to 48 hours (2 days).
- **Bottled water:** Read the label on the bottled water to see how the water was treated. Water that is treated in one or more of these ways is OK:
 - Reverse osmosis
 - Distillation
 - Filtered through an absolute 1 micron or smaller filter (NSF Standard #53 for cyst removal)

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Dietitian/Diet Technician:
206.598.2274

If you have a question about a certain brand of water, call the International Bottled Water Association at 800.928.3711. Ask if the company that creates that brand treats the water in one of the ways listed above. Visit their website to learn more: www.bottledwater.org.

Adapted from "Food Safety Guidelines" by Seattle Cancer Care Alliance.