



## Seniors and Food Safety: When Someone Else is the Cook

Let's face it. Sometimes letting someone else do the cooking is just easier and more enjoyable. And today's seniors have many eating options. However, all of these options do have food safety implications.

When you want to eat at home, but don't feel like cooking or aren't able to, where do you turn?

- Many convenience foods, including complete meals to go, are experiencing runaway popularity.
- Purchased from grocery stores, delis or restaurants, some meals are hot and some are cold.
- Ordering delivered meals from restaurants or restaurant-delivery services is an option many consumers like.
- And, of course, for those who qualify, programs such as Meals on Wheels provide a ready-prepared meal each day.
- Hot or cold ready-prepared meals are perishable and can cause illness when mishandled. Proper handling is essential to ensure the food is safe.

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### The Two-hour Rule

Harmful bacteria can grow rapidly in the "danger zone" (between 40 and 140 F) so remember the two-hour rule. Discard any perishable foods left at room temperature longer than two hours.

When you purchase hot cooked food, keep it hot. Eat and enjoy your food within two hours to prevent harmful bacteria from multiplying. If you are not eating within two hours, keep your food in the oven set at a high enough temperature to keep the food at or above 140 F. (Use a food thermometer to check the temperature.) Stuffing and side dishes also must stay hot. Covering food with foil will help keep it moist.

Rather than keeping cooked food warming in an oven for an extended period of time, cooked foods will taste better if you refrigerate them and then reheat when you are ready to eat.

Divide meat or poultry into small portions to refrigerate or freeze. Refrigerate or freeze gravy, potatoes and other vegetables in shallow containers. Remove stuffing from whole cooked poultry and refrigerate.

You also should eat cold food within two hours, or refrigerate or freeze it for eating another time.

## Reheating?

You may wish to reheat your meal, whether you purchased it hot and then refrigerated it, or purchased it cold.

- Heat thoroughly to 165 F until hot and steaming.

- Bring gravy to a rolling boil.

- If heating in a microwave oven, cover food and rotate dish so it heats evenly. Inadequate heating in the microwave can contribute to illnesses. Consult your owner's manual for complete instructions.

## Eating Out

Whether you're eating out at an upscale restaurant, senior center or fast-food diner, this can be both a safe and enjoyable experience if you take the same precautions you would if you were eating at home.

All food service establishments are required to follow sanitation guidelines that state and local health departments set to ensure cleanliness and good hygiene. However, when you go out to eat, look at how clean things are before you ever sit down. Are the tables, dinnerware and bathrooms neat and tidy? If not, dining somewhere else may be better. A dirty dining room may indicate a dirty kitchen, and a dirty kitchen may lead to unsafe food.

Seniors need to avoid the same foods in restaurants that they avoid at home. If you are unsure about the ingredients in a particular dish, ask before ordering it.

No matter where you eat out, always order your food "well done." Remember that foods such as meat, poultry, fish and eggs need to be cooked thoroughly to kill harmful bacteria. When you're served a meal, check how well it's cooked before you eat it. Make sure it's served to you piping hot and thoroughly cooked, and if it's not, send it back.

## The Doggie Bag

Meal portions seem to be getting bigger and bigger these days, which means you've got another meal waiting for another day. However, you must take care when handling these leftovers.

If you will not be arriving home within two hours of finishing your meal, leaving the leftovers at the restaurant is safer.

Also, remember the inside of a car can get very warm. Bacteria may grow rapidly, so going directly home after eating and putting leftovers in the refrigerator always is safer.

Some senior centers that provide meals do not allow diners to take food away from the site because they know how easily bacteria can multiply to dangerous levels when food is left unrefrigerated too long. Check with your center for its policy on taking leftovers home.

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For more information about food safety, visit the  
NDSU Extension Service Web site: [www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/food.htm](http://www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/food.htm)

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