

Cooking at Home More During COVID-19? What to Know About Food Safety

Novice cooks who are experimenting making more complex meals at home during the pandemic may not be aware of how to prep food safely to avoid foodborne illnesses. Getty Images

- As many people continue to adhere to shelter-in-place recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic, more people are experimenting with cooking meals at home.
- Novice cooks may not be aware that foodborne illnesses are a serious concern, especially when it comes to preparing meat-based dishes.
- Many of the illnesses caused by contaminated food can result in diarrhea, abdominal pain, vomiting, muscle pain, fatigue, and fever, among other symptoms.
- Becoming familiar with safe food preparation recommendations can help reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses while cooking during this unprecedented time.

As with nearly every other aspect of life, the COVID-19 pandemic has completely reoriented how we approach food.

With more people adhering to shelter-in-place recommendations, many people who used to rely on eating quick meals on the go or heading to their workplace cafeterias are now getting reacquainted with their kitchens.

From the family that is now spending more time eating together to the novice cook learning to prepare more complicated meals, it's a time of experimentation in the kitchen that isn't without its risks. Foodborne illnesses are a serious concern, especially when it comes to preparing meat-based dishes.

[name removed] spoke with nutrition and food safety experts about ways you and those sharing your kitchen can stay safe while cooking during this unprecedented time.

What are foodborne illnesses?

Foodborne illnesses are a common danger that comes from cooking. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports

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that these illnesses cause about 48 million people to get sick, cause 128,000 to be hospitalized, and result in 3,000 deaths in the United States each year.

There are about 250 known foodborne illnesses. Some are caused by chemicals and toxins that contaminate food items, but many are the result of viruses, parasites, and bacteria found on food.

What are some of the most common of these microscopic food safety threats? The CDC reports that the most common are norovirus, *Salmonella*, *Clostridium perfringens*, *Campylobacter* and *Staphylococcus aureus*.

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Protecting your food from contaminants

Meredith Carothers, MPH, technical information specialist at the office of public affairs and consumer education at the Food Safety and Inspection Service, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), said there are some key, common-sense recommendations for protecting yourself from ingesting these contaminants.

First and foremost, keeping the food you're about to prepare and yourself clean should be at the top of your mind, Carothers said.

Wash your hands thoroughly — also a crucial reminder for COVID-19 prevention — by rinsing and lathering with soap and water before you touch any food items.

Make sure the utensils you are about to use are clean as well as the surfaces upon which you are about to make your meal.

After this, separate items to prevent cross-contamination. Carothers said that meat and poultry products have naturally occurring bacteria on them, and it's important to avoid juices from a meat item, for instance, on a cutting board that you're using for a different item. Make sure you clean while you're cooking and use different utensils for different ingredients.

Once you're ready for the next step, Carothers stressed that you cook all meat items at a safe internal temperature, use a food thermometer to keep tabs on whether the meat is being cooked satisfactorily, and don't be deceived by the color of the meat — just because it looks fully cooked, doesn't mean it is ready for safe consumption.

The final recommendation to keep in mind is to “chill.” She said that you should freeze or refrigerate your poultry and meat items as soon as you bring them home from the grocery store. Don't leave these items out and exposed. Plus, any meat leftovers should be chilled within 2 hours of cooking them.

Of course, this can be complicated by the summer heat. If the weather is 90°F (32.2°C) or hotter outside, leftover meat or poultry shouldn't be left outside for more than an hour.

“This time of year, with people in their backyards grilling, having a socially distanced get-together this time of year, sometimes you lose track of time and leftovers might sit out too long,” Carothers said. “You should set a timer and be vigilant and make sure to refrigerate or freeze.”

The impact of COVID-19

Once COVID-19 hit, a lot of conflicting and, at times, confusing information was shared about food safety.

Tamika Sims, PhD, director of food technology communications at the International Food Information Council, said that health authorities have conclusively affirmed that “there is no evidence that food or food packaging is spreading COVID-19.”

That being said, she echoed Carothers' point that the handwashing regimen you've been keeping up with since the start of the pandemic should be upheld.

“Handwashing — during food preparation, before and after touching others, before and after using the bathroom, going outside and handling potentially germ-laden objects — is an excellent preventative practice for both healthy and infected individuals,” she stressed. “Handwashing throughout our daily

routines helps us avoid germ transfer between ourselves and others,” Sims said.

She also said that keeping your kitchen as clean as possible is another key to both food and COVID-19 safety. Make sure you disinfect your counter tops, the handles of everything from your refrigerator to cabinets and shelves, and any other area that might come in contact with the food you’re about to eat.

Dana Hunnes, PhD, MPH, RD, a senior dietitian at the University of California Los Angeles Medical Center, added one of the biggest food safety concerns right now is to ensure that you wash fruits and vegetables well when you bring them into your home.

“Setting them in a vinegary water solution might help and then scrubbing them with a clean brush that gets sanitized in the dishwasher between uses,” Hunnes said.

She added that another big food safety concern rests in food recalls — be sure to keep your eye out for the latest news.

Be mindful of food allergies

Now that more people are spending time together in their kitchens at home, they should be more mindful of the dietary concerns of those around them.

What if a roommate or family member has a peanut allergy? What if you are preparing gluten-containing meals near your partner who has celiac disease?

“I would hope that you would be aware of food allergies that exist in your household before the pandemic and be fully cognizant of how to avoid them. But, with that said, of course, there are foods that are a mixture of many ingredients and it is not always possible to know if a food item contains an allergen of a family member’s, especially when sometimes food additives are not so easily identifiable or easily named,” Hunnes said.

She said her best recommendation would be for you to create a list of foods that you know contain allergens that you or someone you are living with are susceptible to, review ingredients before cooking, and confirm that none of the ingredients are dangerous.

“Living with food allergies creates challenges for people at every life stage — from babies to adults. Luckily, food labels and alternative foods can limit some of the stress that allergens bring,” Sims said. “If you believe that you or a loved one has a food allergy, seek out a medical diagnosis by an allergist. This is important for starting a management plan.”

She said anyone who is newly diagnosed can work with a registered dietitian for nutrition advice.

“Dietary changes can be useful for successfully managing a food allergy with limited sacrifice to nutrition or the pleasure of eating,” said Sims.

She said now might be the time for some people to opt for plant-based foods. Hunnes explained that these items don't bring the same risks of the kinds of bacteria found on animal-based items.

Thinking outside the box

For the new chef sheltering at home, what is the best way to start while still being key to avoid foodborne illnesses?

"I typically recommend plant-based meals as in my mind, it cuts out one of the major sources of foodborne contaminants as with meat and eggs," Hunnes said.

"I also tend to recommend that novice cooks look for easy-to-prepare recipes that take 15 minutes or so to make or that have fewer than eight — commonly sourced — ingredients," Hunnes added. "It also helps to find recipes that share common ingredients so that you buy it once, cook it over and over."

Sims repeated the importance of the previously cited recommendations for preparing, cleaning, storing, and freezing food, especially meat items. Again, raw seafood, poultry, meat and eggs can spread germs like *E.coli*. The only way to avoid this? Make sure food safety is your top concern.

Carothers emphasized that the USDA has set up a hotline in case you have any urgent real-time questions about ways to safely prepare a meal and avoid these foodborne illnesses.

She said you can contact the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) or chat with an expert online at ask.usda.gov.

Hunnes said that it might be best to temper some of your expectations. If you're new to cooking, consider starting with simple, manageable meals.

"If you already have a lot going on in your life with stress and other time constraints, now is not the time to try out new complicated recipes with 20 different obscure ingredients," she said. "It will leave you frustrated and calling for takeout."