



Play it Safe with Ready-to-Eat Foods

Foods that are ready to eat as purchased and require no additional prep—like yogurt, cereal, sandwiches, and packaged salads—are handy when you're in a hurry or don't want to cook. But, storing these foods safely can mean the difference between a good day and a bad case of food poisoning. Here's how to stay food safe when storing and eating ready-to-eat foods!



CHILL OUT: USING YOUR FRIDGE AND FREEZER

Staying cool matters when it comes to food. Perishable foods—such as **produce, meat, eggs, dairy, and leftovers**—should be refrigerated or frozen within 2 hours, or 1 hour if kept in air temperatures above 90 °F. Divide leftovers into small, covered containers before chilling to keep food safer for enjoying later.

Space it out! Leave room for air to circulate between foods. Use drawers or upper shelves for storing **fruits and vegetables**. Why? To keep them away from raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs which can cause cross-contamination.

Take the temperature. Use an **appliance thermometer** to check that your fridge is set to 40 °F or below and your freezer at 0 °F or below. Keep refrigerators and freezers clean by washing the insides frequently with hot, soapy water.

Use it or lose it! Ready-to-eat foods are safest when fresh, so eat them as soon as possible.



CHECK YOUR SHELF: CABINET AND PANTRY STORAGE

Keep unopened **bags, boxes, cans, and jars** of non-perishable food in a cool, dry place—not above the stove, under the sink, or anywhere temperatures fluctuate.

Rust, dents, and bulges on cans are danger signs! Throw out cans that are damaged or leaking, jars with loose or bent lids, and any foods that have a foul odor.

Think outside the box—clean food packaging before opening (including cartons, containers, and lids of jars and cans). Why? Because contaminants can transfer from exterior surfaces to the insides of packaged foods.



5 MICROWAVE MUST-DO'S

Keep leftovers and packaged foods safe by following these steps when using the microwave:

1. Cover food with a paper towel or microwave-safe plate.
2. Follow package directions. Standing time lets food finish cooking, so don't skip it—even if you're hungry or in a hurry!
3. Make sure food rotates to allow for even heating. If your microwave doesn't have a turntable, pause cooking to give it a quarter turn by hand a few times.
4. Use a food thermometer to check that the thickest part of the food has reached a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F. If it hasn't, heat it a little longer and check the temperature again.
5. Spills shouldn't stay—wipe them up right away.



CHOICE FOODS FOR AT-RISK GROUPS

If you are pregnant, nursing, have received an organ transplant, or have a chronic health condition like diabetes, cancer, or HIV/AIDS, you may be at a higher risk for foodborne illness. When choosing ready-to-eat foods, pick:

Bottled or processed juices

instead of

Unpasteurized juices

Fruit or vegetable salads

instead of

Ham, chicken, or seafood salads

Pasteurized cheese

instead of

Unpasteurized soft cheese



RUN WITH IT

Bringing food on-the-go? Make sure to eat it within 2 hours (or 1 hour if kept in air temperatures above 90 °F) or pack it safely:

Cold foods

pack with ice

Keep below 40 °F

Hot foods

wrap and place in an insulated container

Keep above 140 °F

Check out the **USDA FoodKeeper App** for more info on safe food storage!