

Food Safety Fundamentals

Ho hum. I know that food safety is not the most exciting topic, but I now have a keen interest in making sure my kitchen is particularly safe. My daughter is nine months old and she's getting too big for her bath tub, so someone suggested I try bathing her in the kitchen sink. For some reason I flashed on a statistic that I saw recently that said the kitchen drain harbors as much as 18,000 bacteria per square inch. First of all, yuck! Second of all, it doesn't even seem safe to wash my dishes in such a dirty sink, let alone my baby. Now I'm on a quest to find out how I can clean up my sink and make it safe for my family to wash their dishes there (but I don't think I'll ever consider washing my baby in the sink, no matter how clean it is). If my sink is that dirty, I'm guessing that there are a few other areas around my kitchen that could use a little sanitizing, so I did some research on the USDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention websites and interviewed Gelson's Staff Food Safety Expert, Marie Kapla. I have been inspired by this information and the way I use and clean my kitchen has been transformed. Please keep an open mind as I share with you what I've learned about how to make your whole kitchen safe for eating—though not for bathing your baby.

✓ Wash Your Hands

The first and most important step you can take to making your kitchen and food safer is washing your hands. It stops the spread of bacteria among you, your food and surfaces around your home. It is extremely important to wash your hands when you get home, before you eat, before you start handling food



and in between handling different foods, especially after touching raw meat, poultry, fish and eggs. Regular hand soap—NOT antibacterial soap or dish soap— and warm water are all you need. Rub your wet soapy hands together for 20 seconds or sing “Happy Birthday” twice (each round takes 10 seconds) to get your hands thoroughly clean. This not only keeps your food safe, it also helps protect you from catching colds, flus and other infectious diseases. If you wash your hands in the kitchen, make sure to keep hand soap by the sink and dry your hands either with paper towels or a towel that is dedicated for drying hands only; otherwise you can reintroduce bacteria to your hands.

✓ Sanitize Surfaces

Food and bacteria go hand-in-hand. Splatters, crumbs, drips and spills all breed dangerous germs, so sinks, drains, faucets, counters and cutting boards all need to be sanitized frequently. Soap and water are great for cleaning and you can also use baking soda and water for a little extra brightening and cleaning power. After you have washed these surfaces, they should be sanitized. You have two options here. The gold standard is a chlorine bleach solution made from one tablespoon of bleach and a quart of water. The other option, and my preference since I have a baby and pets, is full-strength white vinegar. Not only is vinegar safer for living beings and the environment, but since it is a food,



Gelson's registered dietitian, Jessica Siegel, has a Masters in Public Health. However, she is not a doctor and her nutritional recommendations are not tailored to specific health problems. Consult your physician before beginning any nutritional program. To contact Jessica, please call her at 1-800-GELSONS.

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you don't have to worry about rinsing it off like you do with bleach. Pay special attention to cutting boards, since their knicks and cuts can harbor bacteria. It doesn't matter if you use plastic, wood or bamboo as they can all be sanitized equally well with vinegar or bleach solution, though only plastic cutting boards can go in the dishwasher.

✓ Expunge Your Sponge

Sponges are actually pretty controversial among food safety experts. The moist environment of a sponge is dangerous and dirty. It can breed and spread germs and should therefore be sanitized after each use—especially after washing or wiping a surface that came into contact with raw animal products. The best way to sanitize sponges is to boil them in water for five minutes. You can also microwave them, but high-powered microwaves can burn sponges, so keep a close eye on them if you go that route. As an alternative to using a sponge, you can use a small cloth dish towel or bar cloth to wash dishes and change it out every day. To clean, simply wash dirty dish towels in the washing machine with hot water, detergent and hydrogen peroxide or bleach.

How Long is Too Long?

Do you ever wonder how long you can freeze a brisket? Or if week-old hard-boiled eggs can still be eaten? I get a lot of questions like this from customers, so I've made this handy chart of optimal home refrigeration and freezing times for commonly eaten foods. I hope it inspires you to clean out your fridge and get rid of anything that's been in there for longer than the recommended length of time. Of course, if there is a "use by" date on the package, you should observe it unless you freeze the food. Your good judgment should be used, too. If a food is moldy, discolored, or smells or tastes funny, by all means throw it out! Your refrigerator temperature should be kept between 34 and 40° F and your freezer at 0° F or less.

*NR: Not Recommended

Safe Minimum Internal Food Temperatures	
Steaks & Roasts	145° F
Fish	145° F
Pork	160° F
Ground Beef	160° F
Egg Dishes	160° F
Chicken & Turkey	165° F

✓ Wash Produce, Not Meat

Washing your food, especially if you will eat it raw, is an important way to remove dirt and bacteria. Meat and poultry are the exception to this rule, however, because doing so will spread contaminants around your kitchen sink and drain. It is much safer to skip washing these items and concentrate on cooking them properly instead. Produce must be washed regardless of whether you will eat the outside of it, since cutting through a food like an unwashed melon will drag bacteria through the whole fruit. You can use running water and your hands

to wash produce or you can make your own "produce wash." Fill a spray bottle with three parts water and one part white vinegar to spray your edibles and then rinse under running water. Be sure to scrub items with visible dirt, like potatoes, with a vegetable brush.

✓ Cook to the Right Temperature

Temperature is an extremely important factor in keeping food safe. When cooking animal products, you must cook to a minimum internal temperature in order to kill any bacteria-causing foodborne illnesses. You can't tell that a chicken breast is "done" just by looking at it. You must use a food thermometer to take the internal temperature to determine if it is thoroughly cooked. Use an instant-read thermometer with a probe, insert it into the center of the thickest part of the meat and compare the temperature with my Safe Minimum Internal Food Temperatures chart to be sure it is done. Don't forget to wash your thermometer after each use!

Dairy	Refrigerator	Freezer
Butter	1-3 months	6-9 months
Margarine	4-5 months	12 months
Cheese, hard (unopened)	6 months	6 months
Cheese, hard (opened)	3-4 weeks	6 months
Cheese, soft	2 weeks	6 months
Cream cheese (opened)	2 weeks	NR
Cottage cheese (opened)	1 week	NR
Whipped cream (aerosol can)	3-4 weeks	NR
Whipped cream (fresh)	1 day	1-2 months
Milk (opened)	7 days	3 months
Soy milk (opened)	7-10 days	NR
Sour cream	7-21 days	NR
Yogurt	7-14 days	1-2 months
Eggs (whole, raw)	3-5 weeks	NR
Egg whites (raw)	2-4 days	12 months
Eggs (hard boiled)	7 days	NR
Egg substitutes (unopened)	10 days	NR
Egg substitutes (opened)	3 days	NR
Mayonnaise (commercial, opened)	2 months	NR
Juice		
Bottled juice	5-10 days	NR
Fresh-squeezed juice	3 days	NR

✓ Stay Out of the “Danger Zone”

The “danger zone” is the range of temperatures between 40 and 140° F in which bacteria multiply rapidly every 20 minutes. Food that is left in the “danger zone” is safe to eat for about two hours, but after that it must be thrown away since bacteria counts can be dangerously high. Aside from the safety issue, the quality, taste and appearance of food left in the “danger zone” deteriorate rapidly and you probably would not want to eat it anyway. If you are reheating food, it is best to do so rapidly, so that it doesn't spend too much time in the “danger zone.” Also, use a thermometer to make sure leftovers are reheated to their safe minimum internal temperature just in case they were not cooked or cooled optimally the first time around.

✓ Keep Cold Foods Cold

Make sure the temperature of your refrigerator is below 40° F. Since different foods maintain quality and shelf life better at different temperatures, a good average refrigerator temperature is 36° F and a good freezer temperature is 0° F or below. The back of the top shelf in the refrigerator is the coldest spot and the sides of the freezer are the warmest. Use a refrigerator thermometer to monitor your fridge's temps. When thawing food, the best way to do it is to plan ahead and do it in the refrigerator in a bowl or on a tray with high sides to collect the water that runs off and to prevent it from coming into contact with other foods. Most food takes 24 hours to thaw (some estimates say five to eight hours per pound) and large items, like turkeys,

Safer Kitchen Tools Checklist

- Baking soda
- Bleach
- Dish soap
- Hand soap
- Hydrogen peroxide
- Instant-read probe thermometer
- Paper towels
- Refrigerator thermometer
- Soap & Water bar cloths
- Spray bottles
- White vinegar

take much longer. Never defrost foods on the counter. When cooling hot foods, it is best to do so rapidly, so that it gets out of the “danger zone” as soon as possible after it is done cooking. The best way to achieve this is to break the food down into small batches and cool it uncovered in the fridge.

✓ Don't Cross-Contaminate

Cross-contamination can happen in a flash and it's such an easy mistake to make. Keep raw, cooked and ready-to-eat foods separate when shopping, storing or preparing foods. Always put your meat, seafood and poultry purchases in a plastic bag and keep them in a separate part of your shopping cart and refrigerator from your produce purchases. Raw animal foods should always be stored at the bottom of the fridge so that if their juices leak they will not run onto other foods. Furthermore, never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw animal foods and always wash and sanitize your cutting board and other surfaces and knives after they have come into contact with raw animal products.

Every year about 76 million Americans become sick from foodborne illnesses, many of which result from unsafe practices at home. Children, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems get hit the hardest, but everyone is susceptible. The practices I describe here may take a couple of extra steps or feel inconvenient at first, but in a short time they will become part of your routine and, most importantly, they will help you make your kitchen a safer place to eat.

Beef, Pork, Lamb	Refrigerator	Freezer
Roasts, steaks, chops (raw)	3-5 days	4-12 months
Ground meat (raw)	1-2 days	3-4 months
Dishes cooked with meat	3-4 days	2-3 months
Cooked meat	3-4 days	2-3 months
Cooked meat in gravy or broth	1-2 days	6 months
Beef/pork lunch meats (unopened)	2 weeks	1-2 months
Beef/pork lunch meats (after opening)	3-5 days	1-2 months
Sausage (raw)	1-2 days	1-2 months
Bacon	7 days	1 month
Poultry		
Whole (raw)	1-2 days	6-12 months
Pieces (raw)	1-2 days	9 months
Dishes cooked with chicken	3-4 days	4-6 months
Ground chicken (cooked)	3-4 days	2-3 months
Chicken/turkey lunch meats (unopened)	2 weeks	1-2 months
Chicken/turkey lunch meats (after opening)	3-5 days	1-2 months
Fish, Shellfish		
Lean fish (fresh, raw)	1-2 days	6 months
Fatty fish (fresh, raw)	1-2 days	2-3 months
Lean and fatty fish (cooked)	3-4 days	4-6 months
Smoked fish (cold smoked)	5-8 days	2 months
Smoked fish (hot smoked, vacuum sealed)	2 weeks	2 months (unopened)
Lobster tails (raw)	2 days in shell	6 months
Shrimp, scallops, crayfish, squid (raw)	1 day	3-6 months
Clams, mussels, oysters (raw, shucked)	1 day	3-6 months
Shellfish (cooked)	3-4 days	3 months
Canned fish (opened)	3-4 days	2 months (out of can)

Naked Food of the Month: Eggplant

Next up in my “Naked Food of the Month” series is eggplant. This member of the nightshade family is incredibly versatile and tasty even with very little preparation; therefore, I consider it a great “naked” food.

The purple skin of the eggplant (called aubergine in France) is one of the most important parts of the plant. According to the color rule, in which deeper colors indicate more nutrients and different colors correspond to different phytonutrients, purple signals the presence of anthocyanins (also found in blueberries and red cabbage) that have been shown to help protect against heart disease by lowering LDL cholesterol and triglycerides. Anthocyanins also act as antioxidants to protect the body from free radical damage that can lead to heart disease and cancer. Other antioxidants in eggplant include chlorogenic acid, which seems to block the formation of deleterious nitrosamines and reduce the risk of liver and colon cancers, and nasunin, which appears to prevent the formation of blood vessels that feed malignant tumors.

A serving of eggplant is ½ cup cooked, which has only 20 calories and a respectable 3 grams of fiber. Eggplants are also a great source of potassium, copper, folate and magnesium.

Eggplants are available throughout the year at Gelson's. When selecting any variety,



choose those that are heavy for their size, firm, shiny, smooth, small or medium in size and deep purple. Larger eggplants tend to be tougher and contain more seeds. They can be stored in the crisper drawer for up to one week, but it is best to use them as soon as possible after you bring them home.

Eggplant must be cooked before eating and the best cooking methods for it are grilling, broiling, roasting, braising and sautéing. When preparing eggplant, cut off both ends and either slice or cube the pieces; you can also roast it whole in the oven or microwave (though poke a few holes in it first to prevent it from exploding!). Try to keep the skin on, since that is where most of the nutrients are, though you can peel it off with a vegetable peeler if necessary. Use only stainless-steel or cast-iron cookware with eggplants as they react and discolor with aluminum pans and carbon-steel knives.

Though usually not required, especially if you buy smaller, younger eggplants, large globular eggplants are often salted before cooking in order to tenderize them, reduce their

bitterness, draw out their excess water and prevent the absorption of too much fat.

You can find both standard globular and Japanese eggplants at Gelson's. They are actually the same variety, but the Japanese eggplants are just younger, sweeter, more tender versions of the standard larger ones and they can be used interchangeably in recipes. Eggplant pairs well with cheese, curry, garlic, lamb, marjoram, miso, mushrooms, onions, oregano, parsley, peppers, soy sauce and tomatoes. This month, try my recipes for Naked Japanese Eggplant and Cheesy Baked Eggplant.

Jessica's Store Appearances Body Fat Testing

Jessica will be offering complimentary body fat testing and answering your questions about weight loss, food and nutrition. For more information, please visit www.gelsons.com.

Thursday, March 18
Marina del Rey 4:00pm

Friday, March 19
Encino 12:00pm
Sherman Oaks 4:00pm

Monday, March 22
West Hollywood 12:00pm

Tuesday, March 23
Hollywood 4:00pm

Friday, March 26
Century City 12:00pm

Saturday, March 27
Newport Beach 12:30pm

Testing method is Bioelectrical Impedance and is not appropriate for people with pacemakers or osteoporosis, pregnant women or children. Be well-hydrated for most accurate results.

Read My New Blog!

I want to help you raise healthy eaters, so I have started a blog called “Healthy Families” on our website, www.gelsons.com. I document my experiences and thoughts about feeding my nine-month old daughter and hopefully impart some worthwhile nutritional wisdom to my readers. Please check it weekly and join me on this very important parenting journey.

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If you have any questions, please feel free to call Jessica at 1-800-GELSONS (435-7667) or visit our website www.gelsons.com for more nutrition information and store locations.