



FOOD SAFETY: STORING AND REHEATING LEFTOVERS AND PREPARED FOODS

Do you have leftovers or foods you prepared ahead for future meals? Properly storing and reheating these foods helps lower the risk of foodborne illness. Follow the guidelines below.

COOLING TIPS FOR LARGE BATCHES

Use 1 of these methods to quickly cool large batches of cooked food before you refrigerate them.

Split into small batches:

- ▶ Cut roasts, turkeys, and other large pieces of meat into smaller slices (about 2 to 3 inches thick) before wrapping the food and placing it in the refrigerator.
- ▶ Divide large pots of chili, stew, and soup into small, shallow containers.

Make an ice bath (great for soups and stews):

- ▶ Fill a clean kitchen sink halfway with cold water and ice.
 - ▶ Place the container of hot food into the ice water. (Warning: Do not use a glass or ceramic dish. It can break when the temperature changes quickly from hot to cold.)
 - ▶ Stir the food occasionally to help it cool evenly.
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Storing Leftovers and Prepared Foods

- ▶ Wash your hands with soap and water before handling food.
- ▶ Bacteria in food are more likely to grow when the temperature of the food is in the “danger zone” between 40°F and 140°F.
 - To limit the risk of bacteria that can make you sick, refrigerate leftovers and prepared foods within 2 hours of cooking.
 - If the temperature is over 90°F outside, do not leave cooked food out for longer than 1 hour.
 - Throw away food that is not refrigerated within the safe time span.
- ▶ Store leftovers and prepared foods in small, shallow, airtight containers in the refrigerator.
- ▶ Label containers with the date the food was prepared before you refrigerate or freeze them.
- ▶ Do not stack containers of leftover food in the refrigerator. Stacking prevents cold air from circulating around the containers and slows down the cooling process.
- ▶ You can refrigerate small amounts of hot food right away because they don’t take long to cool. Take extra care when storing large batches of leftovers or prepared foods that are still hot. Even in the refrigerator,

IS IT STILL SAFE TO EAT?

Use the chart below to learn how long you can store leftovers or prepared foods in the refrigerator. Never taste food to see if it is still safe to eat—you can get sick from eating just 1 bite of spoiled food. When in doubt, throw it out.

Type of Food	Use Within
Cooked fresh vegetables	3 to 4 days
Cooked pasta	3 to 5 days
Cooked rice	4 to 6 days
Ham, sliced	3 to 4 days
Cooked beef, poultry, fish, or seafood	3 to 4 days
Soups, casseroles, and stews	3 to 4 days
Stuffing	3 to 4 days
Deli counter meat	3 to 5 days
Hot dogs, opened package	7 days

they can stay warm for hours, and placing large containers of hot food directly into the refrigerator can warm the refrigerator to unsafe temperatures (above 40° F). See **Cooling Tips for Large Batches**.

- ▶ Many leftovers and prepared foods stay safe in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days. See the sidebar **Is it Still Safe to Eat?** for information on specific foods.
- ▶ To store leftovers or prepared foods for more than a few days, freeze them in freezer-safe tightly sealed containers. Thaw frozen leftovers in the refrigerator or microwave (never at room temperature).

Reheating Foods

- ▶ The texture and quality of food decreases each time you reheat it. Reheat only the amount of food you plan to eat right away.
- ▶ When reheating soups, stews, and sauces on the stove, heat them until they boil.
- ▶ Reheat meats and casseroles in the microwave or in an oven set to at least 325° F. Be sure to use microwave-safe or oven-safe dishes.
- ▶ Leftovers reheated in the oven or microwave must reach an internal temperature of 165° F. Use a food thermometer to check the temperature of the food.
- ▶ Stir food frequently when reheating to make sure it heats evenly.
- ▶ Allow microwaved foods to sit for 2 minutes after reheating. This time is necessary to bring the food to a safe internal temperature (165° F).

