

Keeping Your Food on a Curfew...Keeping Your Food Safe

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Yes, your food needs parental supervision. There are rules about how long it can be out and what other foods it can 'hang out' with in the shopping cart and cutting board (to keep it from picking up others' germs or bad habits). These rules keep you and those you care for safe from food borne illness. As a cancer patient, you may develop a weakened immune system from the side effects of treatment or from the disease process itself. When functioning normally, our immune system helps rid our body of dangerous bacteria, toxins and viruses. Food contains bacteria or other pathogens. Summer temperatures, unsafe food handling, and a weakened immune system can become a recipe for trouble. Bacteria need food, time and temperatures between 40 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit to multiply rapidly and make toxins that make us sick. Since food borne illness can be serious-or even fatal in a healthy person- paying attention to food temperatures and how long food is out of proper refrigeration is a wise choice.

Cold temperatures slow the growth of harmful bacteria. Use an appliance thermometer to be sure the temperature of your refrigerator is 40° F degrees or below at all times. Avoid leaving food out beyond two hours of cooking and it is helpful to divide large batches into smaller containers so they cool off before the bacteria multiply too much.

Before we start our shopping trip, we are counting on the grower, harvester, processor, transporter, warehouse and grocery store (other parental-types) to keep the bacteria in our foods to a minimum. Once we put the food into our cart, the job is up to us.

Here are a few tips to becoming a better shopper.

- Always read the labels for the 'sell by' date. Never purchase foods beyond this date. (Think of this as a curfew.)

- While you're shopping, put raw packaged meat, poultry, or seafood into a plastic bag before placing it in the shopping cart so that its juices will not drip on and contaminate the other foods. (This keeps your food from 'mixing' with the 'wrong crowd'.)
- Buy only pasteurized milk, cheese and other dairy products from the refrigerated sections. When buying fruit juice from the refrigerated section of the store, be sure that the juice label says it is pasteurized. This means it has been heat-treated to kill bacteria. (Think of this as it had good rearing.)
- Purchase eggs in the shell from the refrigerated section of the store. For recipes that call for eggs that are raw or undercooked when the dish is served (Caesar salad dressing and homemade ice cream are two examples) use either shell eggs that have been treated to destroy Salmonella by pasteurization, or pasteurized egg products, like Egg Beaters, for example.
- When purchasing canned goods, make sure that they are free of dents, cracks, or bulging lids. Once home, remember to clean each lid before opening the can.
- Pick up perishable foods at the end of the shopping trip and plan to go directly home from the grocery store. (How many times have you told your children to come straight home to stay out of trouble?)
- Always refrigerate perishable foods within two hours of purchasing.
- When the outside temperature is above 90° F, refrigerate your food within one hour of purchasing.
- In hot weather, take a cooler with ice or blue cold packs in case you have an unexpected delay getting home.
- Using the foil-like, reflective insulated bags for sale in the ice cream section may be helpful as well for produce.

When taking food to a summer cookout or to a loved one who is undergoing cancer treatments, we must attend to food temperatures while the food is in route. Remember, the danger zone in which bacteria grows most rapidly is between 40 and 140° F.

- Keep cold food cold, at 40° F or below. To be safest, place cold food in a cooler with ice or frozen gel packs.
- For cookouts, serving dishes of cold foods can be set in a shallow container of ice.
- Hot food should be kept hot at 140° F or above. Wrap the food well and place in an insulated container. If the dish will not be eaten within the two-hour window, go ahead and place it in the refrigerator for your friend.
- For cookouts, if the food is expected to be out more than one hour in 90° weather (two hours in cooler weather), use a crock pot with an extension cord and electrical outlet to keep food safe.
- Once food has been in the danger zone (40-140° F) for two hours, it should be thrown away. (There is no rehabilitation program for this troubled food.)

When it comes to food safety, we know it is always better safe than sorry. Our bodies are magnificent creations and are capable of keeping us from much harm; but it can only do so much, especially when we are not our healthiest. Keep your food on a curfew and keep your body safe.

For more information on food safety call Food and Drug Administration at 1-888-SAFEFOOD or online at:
www.cfsan.fda.gov, www.foodsafety.gov, and www.fsis.usda.gov