

Student guide to food safety and hygiene

Advice for students on how to keep their kitchen clean and reduce the risk of food poisoning.

When going to university or living away from home for the first time, you may be taking on more responsibility for deciding the food you eat, and how you prepare it, than before.

Now that you may be cooking more, it's important to understand [the basics of food hygiene](#) so that you can stay safe and not let food poisoning affect your experience.

Use this student guide to explore the basics of food hygiene and safety to protect yourself and those around you.

Avoiding food poisoning at home

Food in your fridge may contain harmful bacteria and if stored for too long, at the wrong temperature, or not cooked properly, can cause food poisoning. Harmful bacteria can also spread on unclean surfaces around your kitchen.

Avoid food poisoning at home by understanding food safety and applying good food hygiene practices in your home.

Understanding use-by and best before dates

We know that when budgets are tight, food hygiene can slip. It might be tempting to eat food that is beyond the use-by date, but doing so puts you at increased risk of food poisoning.

It's important to know the difference between [a use-by date and a best before date](#) so that you can make safe food choices. Always check the label to make sure your food is in date and safe to eat.

A **use-by date** on food is about safety. This is the most important date to remember. You can eat food until and, on the use-by date but not after. You will see use-by dates on food that goes off quickly, such as meat products or ready-to-eat salads.

Food can look and smell fine even after its use-by date, but that doesn't mean it's safe to eat. It could still make you ill. You cannot see, smell or taste the bacteria that cause food poisoning so should never trust the sniff test on use by date products.

The **best before date** is about quality, not safety. The food will be safe to eat after this date but may not be at its best. Its flavour and texture might not be as good; you can use the sniff test on best before date products as these are about quality not safety.

If your food is close to the use-by date, you can help keep the food for longer by freezing it. A freezer acts as a pause button, meaning food in a freezer won't deteriorate and most bacteria cannot grow in it. You can freeze pre-packaged food right up to the day of the use-by date. See below for more information on freezing and defrosting.

Food hygiene in a shared fridge

We realise that at university, and when living away from home for the first time, you may only have access to one shelf in a shared fridge.

Normally we recommend that you store raw meat, fish and shellfish on the bottom shelf of your fridge. This is to [reduce the risk of cross-contamination](#) with other ready-to-eat foods. However, in a shared fridge this may not be possible.

When sharing a fridge, avoid ready-to-eat food being stored beside open packets of raw meat and fish on the same shelf. It may help to put any opened raw meat or fish into separate containers that are sealed or waterproof. This will help avoid leakages and limit the spread of harmful bacteria.

You should also avoid putting open tin cans in the fridge as the food inside may experience bacterial growth and develop a metallic taste. Follow the manufacturers instructions or place the contents in an appropriate storage container before refrigerating.

Remember to check the contents in the fridge regularly so that any foods past their [use-by dates](#) are disposed of quickly.

Cooking your food properly

[Cooking your food](#) at the right temperature and for the correct length of time will ensure that any harmful bacteria are killed.

It's important that you always check the advice on food packaging and follow the cooking instructions provided until the food is steaming hot.

Some products such as breaded chicken, chicken goujons and other meat products, are often assumed to be ready to eat, but can actually contain raw meat. Such products are not ready to eat, unless stated on the packaging. Always check the cooking instructions, heat appropriately and ensure you wash your hands after handling raw meat products.

Try not to cook different foods at the same time in the oven if they require different temperatures, as this may lead to some food not being fully cooked. If you do cook different items at the same time, put the item which takes the longest to cook in the oven first, then check on it while cooking before adding the other foods. You can use a timer to help with this. Make sure you are following the instructions on the manufacturer's packaging.

Different types of meat will have different cooking requirements:

- red meat such as steaks can be served pink, rare or bloody and will be safe to eat as long as the surface has been adequately seared
- other meats, like chicken and pork, as well as minced meat products such as burgers, kebabs and sausages, should not be served pink or rare as bacteria can be in the meat

Harmful bacteria such as [Salmonella](#) and [Campylobacter](#) can be found in raw meat and undercooked poultry. This means inadequate cooking can lead to food poisoning.

Tips

Don't wash raw chicken. Washing raw chicken and other meat can spread campylobacter by splashing it onto hands, work surfaces, clothing and cooking equipment.

Use our [home food fact checker](#) for more advice on common food safety questions and misconceptions.

Hand washing

To reduce the risk of spreading harmful bacteria you should regularly wash your hands.

You should wash your hands:

- before preparing food
- before handling cooked or ready to eat food
- before eating and after preparing raw foods, or handling its packaging
- after handling waste and touching bins
- after cleaning surfaces
- after eating and drinking
- after sneezing, touching pets or going to the toilet

Where possible you should wash your hands with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds.

Making the most of your food

When budgets are tight, avoiding unnecessary food waste can be a really useful way to make your money go further. This does not mean having to compromise on food safety.

[Love Food Hate Waste](#) have some useful tips and advice on how to make your food go further and reduce waste.

Leftovers

Reusing and reinventing your leftovers is a great way to make the most of your food. Not only will you save money, having prepared meals is also convenient for days when you don't have to time to cook, or don't feel like cooking. Cool and cover your leftovers, and put them in a fridge or freezer within one to two hours. Leftovers stored in the fridge should be eaten within 48 hours.

You can split leftovers into smaller portions so that they cool quicker. This can also help portion control and planning for future meals.

Tips

Leftover foods such as rice should be cooled as quickly as possible, ideally within one hour.

Rice should be kept in the fridge for no more than one day. Cooked rice should not be reheated more than once. You can also freeze rice to eat at another time.

You can use previously cooked and frozen meat to make a new meal, once it has fully defrosted. You should eat the new meal within 24 hours.

For safety and to reduce waste, only take out of the freezer what you intend to use within 24 hours of defrosting.

Reheating your Food

When food is at a temperature of between 8 - 63°C, this is called 'the danger zone'. Between these temperatures the bacteria may grow and make you ill. It is important that food is cooked until steaming hot throughout, rather than warmed, as the high temperature will kill bacteria that may be present.

When reheating leftovers, you should only ever reheat once. This is because repeatedly changing temperatures provides more chances for bacteria to grow and cause food poisoning. You can reheat food in the microwave, on the hob or in the oven. Cooking times will vary according to the food you are reheating and how much food you are reheating. Here are some tips to make sure you have reheated your food thoroughly:

- follow instructions on the original food packaging if available or check the microwave manufacturer's guidance on general cooking advice, including advice on stirring and standing
- microwaves can heat in 'pockets' so stirring or turning the food helps to prevent pockets of cold food in your meal
- some leftovers, such as lasagne, are better reheated in smaller portions to allow more even heating
- if reheating on the hob, stir frequently and make sure the food is heated throughout

Freezing and defrosting your food

A freezer acts as a pause button. This means food in a freezer won't deteriorate and most bacteria cannot grow in it. You can freeze pre-packaged food right up to the use-by date.

Leftovers and homemade foods should be frozen as soon as possible. Make sure any warm dishes are cooled before putting them in your freezer. Freezing food into individual portions will make them easier to defrost and you will use only what you need. You might find it helpful to label your food with the contents and the date it was frozen.

When you take your food out of the freezer, it's important to defrost it safely before cooking or eating it. Don't defrost food at room temperature. Ideally, food should be defrosted fully in the fridge in a leakproof container or a plate to contain drips to avoid cross contamination with the rest of the food in the fridge. If this isn't possible, use a microwave on the defrost setting directly before cooking.

Make sure your food is fully defrosted before cooking. Partially defrosted food may not cook evenly, meaning that harmful bacteria could survive the cooking process. Once food has been defrosted, cook and eat it within 24 hours.

Bulk cooking

A cost effective way to manage your food and budget can be to bulk cook one dish and separate it out into different containers to eat throughout the week.

When bulk cooking, remember to cool and cover your food, and put them in a fridge or freezer within one to two hours. Do not leave food in the pan for extended periods of time as bacteria may grow.

Food that has been adequately cooled down within 1–2 hours should be stored in the fridge and consumed within two days. If you cook more portions than you can eat in two days, freeze any extra portions. Labelling your frozen leftovers with the type of food and date it was frozen will help you to keep organised.

Bulk cooking can be a great way to make your budget go further, but avoid preparing certain foods, such as rice, in advance, unless you plan to freeze it. You can get food poisoning from eating reheated rice.

Consume cooked rice within 24 hours of cooking. When you reheat any rice, always check the dish is steaming hot all the way through.

When shopping, aim to buy foods that you know you will eat (or freeze for later use) within the use by and best before dates.

Food past its best before date

The [best before date](#) on a food label is about quality, not safety.

You can still eat food safely for a period after the best before date, but never beyond the use-by date.

Keeping your kitchen clean

Effective cleaning and sanitation helps remove bacteria and stops harmful bacteria and viruses from spreading onto food.

Establishing a cleaning rota amongst your housemates and ensuring that there are a sufficient amount of effective cleaning products (that will kill bacteria and viruses) available, can help to encourage good cleaning practices in a shared kitchen.

Avoiding cross-contamination on surfaces and chopping boards

It's important to keep all surfaces, chopping boards, utensils and dishes clean before preparing food. This is to avoid cross-contamination. This is particularly important when preparing your meal, especially raw meat.

You are removing harmful bacteria by cleaning with warm, soapy water or by using disinfectant cleaning products and following the instructions on the label.

Cleaning with washing up liquid does not kill the bacteria, but removes them into the waste water. Because of this, change washing up water regularly.

While it is possible to clean with cold water, using warm water will ensure that the washing up liquid lathers up properly and will help break down food particles. It is important that it lathers so it can be more effective at removing the bacteria.

Cleaning high-touch items

In every kitchen there are high-touch items that regularly come into contact with dirty surfaces, but which may be overlooked when cleaning. These can pose an increased risk of cross-contamination.

It is important to wash or change dish cloths, tea towels, sponges and oven gloves regularly. Dish cloths and tea towels should be washed in the washing machine on a hot cycle. If you wash them, let them dry before you use them again as dirty, damp cloths allow bacteria to breed.

Remember to disinfect high-touch areas around the kitchen, such as the fridge door, sink tap handles, and cupboard door handles. Smart phones and devices are used often during cooking and in the kitchen so should also be disinfected regularly with antibacterial wipes or similar.

Taking out bins

Food waste should be disposed of in the appropriate bins in the kitchen. This should be regularly removed when the bins are full and put in the designated outside large bin area to avoid any infestation of flies, pests and a foul smell.

If you are taking the bins out or emptying recycling containers, it is important to wash your hands after. This is especially important after handling dry rubbish as it's not always obvious that it could be contaminated with bacteria.

You may find it helpful to establish a rota amongst your housemates to encourage good hygiene practices.

Eating out and ordering food safely

If you eat out or order takeaway food when you move to a new town or city, it's important to consider food hygiene before ordering. If a restaurant has good food hygiene practices in place, you can eat with confidence and there is significantly less risk of food poisoning.

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme

You can find the rating of restaurants and takeaways in advance by [checking the food hygiene rating](#) on our website or look for the sticker in the window when you're out and about.

The ratings are a snapshot of the standards of food hygiene found at the time of inspection by a food safety officer from the local council. This includes how food is handled, stored, and prepared, the cleanliness and condition of facilities and buildings, including hand washing and pest control, and how food safety is managed, including that there are systems and checks in place to ensure food is safe to eat, and staff have knowledge of food safety.

The business receives a rating based on the hygiene standards found at the time of inspection:

- 5 is top of the scale, this means the hygiene standards are very good
- 0 is at the bottom of the scale, this means urgent improvement is necessary

Any food business can achieve the top rating by doing what is required by food law. [Read more about the scheme](#).



Managing a food allergy

Living with a food allergy can affect people in different ways. Having a food allergy can pose extra challenges to daily tasks and have unexpected impacts on new experiences at university or when living with others for the first time.

While the information on this page refers to food allergies, it also relates to food intolerances and coeliac disease. Although these conditions are different, our advice on managing risks and ensuring safe food practices still applies.

We have [advice for young people with a food allergy](#) on navigating the new experiences that come with student life that can bring about extra risks.

Living with a food allergy

For many, living away from home can be the first time that you take full responsibility for managing a food allergy.

You will need to get used to checking all food labels and understand ingredients labelling. Don't assume that a food will be safe to eat without checking.

Some food and drink, including spirits, sauces and ready-made meals may contain allergens. Ingredients can change from the last time you had it.

Shared living with a food allergy

Living with a food allergy, you may find that you are asked a lot of questions and that you have to ask about different ingredients. Try not to feel uncomfortable asking these questions as they are important to your safety. Ask direct questions to make sure people understand the severity for you and that you get accurate information.

Telling partners and friends about your allergy is important, so that they know whether to avoid certain food types. This will help them better understand how they can help you manage your food allergy.

Eating out and ordering a takeaway with a food allergy

It is important to speak to the restaurant every time when you eat out, order a takeaway or get food delivered. Don't assume that a meal is safe just because you have had it before.

This is because the recipe, ingredients, chef or kitchen staff may have changed. Often it is not clear, unless you ask, which allergens are in meals and what quantity they are in.

If you don't feel that the person you're ordering from fully understands your needs, ask to speak to someone else. If you're not confident they understand your allergy, consider ordering from elsewhere.

Tips

We have more [top tips for ordering an allergy-safe takeaway](#) in our advice for teenagers and young adults with a food allergy.