

Handling Leftovers Safely

The chance of food poisoning increases the longer you store food at room temperature after it has been cooked. Improper handling or storage of cooked foods is a common cause of food poisoning in the home. Foods are considered "leftovers" if you or your family do not eat them within two hours of the food being cooked. Most people hate to throw out food that has not been eaten at the end of a meal. With proper care, it is possible to avoid both waste and illness.



If food is left at room temperature for more than two hours (one hour in warm weather), bacteria can grow to harmful levels, making it unsafe to eat. The two hour period starts when the food is removed from the oven and includes the time before and after service of the food. The most important thing to remember is that once food has been cooked it should be refrigerated or frozen within two hours.



Always wash your hands with soap and warm water before handling any cooked foods, especially food you store to eat later. Handle the food using clean utensils and place all leftovers into clean containers. The containers used to store food should be no more than two inches deep to allow rapid, even cooling. Place items into the fridge uncovered until cooling is complete. Cover the containers tightly leaving air space around the containers in the fridge or freezer.

It is best to eat leftovers within two days. Freeze any leftovers that will not be eaten immediately, and be sure to write the date on the container.

When reheating leftovers, bring soups, sauces, and gravies to a boil. Heat all other leftovers to a minimum of 74°C (165°F), stirring food to make sure that it is properly heated throughout. Do not reheat foods more than once or mix leftovers with fresh foods.

Never taste leftovers of questionable age and safety. If in doubt, throw it out.