

Wise Notes for Consumers

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How long can you safely keep leftovers in the refrigerator?

The first step in having safe leftovers is cooking the food safely. Use a food thermometer to make sure that the food is cooked to a safe, minimum internal temperature.

Leftovers can be kept for three to four days in the refrigerator. Be sure to eat them within that time. After that, the risk of food poisoning increases. If you don't think you'll be able to eat leftovers within four days, freeze them immediately.

Food poisoning — also called foodborne illness — is caused by harmful organisms, such as bacteria in contaminated food. Because bacteria typically don't change the taste, smell or look of food, you can't tell whether a food is dangerous to eat. So if you're in doubt about a food's safety, it's best to throw it out.

Fortunately, most cases of food poisoning can be prevented with proper food handling. To practice food safety, quickly refrigerate perishable foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, dairy and eggs — don't let them sit more than two hours at typical room temperature or more than one hour at temperatures above 90 F (32 C). To prevent bacterial growth, it's important to cool food rapidly so it reaches as fast as possible the safe refrigerator-storage temperature of 40° F or below. To do this, divide large amounts of food into shallow containers. A big pot of soup, for example, will take a long time to cool, inviting bacteria to multiply and increasing the danger of foodborne illness. Instead, divide the pot of soup into smaller containers so it will cool quickly. Cut large items of food into smaller portions to cool. For whole roasts or hams, slice or cut them into

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smaller parts. Cut turkey into smaller pieces and refrigerate. Slice breast meat; legs and wings may be left whole. Hot food can be placed directly in the refrigerator or be rapidly chilled in an ice or cold water bath before refrigerating.

Cover leftovers, wrap them in airtight packaging, or seal them in storage containers. These practices help keep bacteria out, retain moisture, and prevent leftovers from picking up odors from other food in the refrigerator. Immediately refrigerate or freeze the wrapped leftovers for rapid cooling.

When you're ready to eat leftovers, reheat them on the stove, in the oven or in the microwave until the internal temperature reaches 165 F (74 C). Because they may not get hot enough, slow cookers and chafing dishes aren't recommended for reheating leftovers.

To obtain additional information concerning food safety, contact the Extension office at 940/627-3341.

Source: Mayo Clinic and USDA