

## Protecting tiny tummies and sensitive systems

You'd feel bad enough if you made a mistake preparing food which caused a member of your family to get sick with food poisoning – but imagine how you'd feel if that family member got critically ill and their life was endangered.

We can all get food poisoning, but for some people the consequences can be much more serious than for others.

### Who is at risk?

People most at risk of getting food poisoning are those people whose immune system is not very strong. They are the very young such as babies and toddlers (the 'tiny tummies'), the elderly, generally people 65-70 or older, and those who have poor immunity because of illness or medical treatment, such as chemotherapy, which has attacked their immune system (the 'sensitive systems'). Pregnant women are also more at risk to some types of foodborne illnesses.

Most of us will find ourselves preparing food for such people (including ourselves) at some time in our lives. We really need to understand what we can do to ensure that we keep the food we are serving as safe as possible.

There are no special rules for cooking for vulnerable people — you just need to be even fussier than normal. There are also some foods that pose a higher risk than others, particularly of passing on a *Listeria* infection which is dangerous for the elderly, those with weakened immune systems or pregnant women and their unborn and newborn children. These higher risk foods should be avoided by such susceptible people.

### What are the higher risk foods?

Cold ready to eat meats	cooked or uncooked, packaged or unpackaged eg roast beef, ham, etc
Cold cooked chicken	purchased whole, portions, sliced or diced
Pate	refrigerated pate, liverwurst or meat spreads
Salads	pre-prepared or pre-packaged fruit or vegetable salads e.g. from salad bars, smorgasbords, retail outlets etc
Chilled seafood	raw or smoked ready-to-eat eg oysters, sashimi, sushi or smoked fish
Prawns	Pre-cooked peeled prawns eg in prawn cocktails, sandwich fillings and prawn salads
Cheese	Pre-packaged and delicatessen soft, semi soft and surface ripened cheeses eg brie, camembert, ricotta, feta and blue
Ice cream	soft serve
Other dairy products	unpasteurised dairy products (e.g. raw goats milk, cheese or yoghurt made from raw milk)

## What precautions should I take when preparing foods

The six key messages put out by the Food Safety Information Council are important when cooking for anyone, but absolutely critical when cooking for people with tiny tummies and sensitive systems.

They are

- **Keep hot food steaming hot**
- **Keep cold food refrigerated**
- **Cook food properly**
- **Separate raw and ready to eat foods**
- **Keep kitchen and utensils clean**
- **Wash hands with soap and dry thoroughly**

### Keep hot food steaming hot and cold food refrigerated

Foods that could give you food poisoning should be stored under controlled temperatures, that is at or below 5 degrees Celsius or, for hot food, at or above 60 degrees Celsius. Low temperatures prevent food poisoning bacteria, which may be present in the food, from multiplying to dangerous levels. At temperatures of 60 degrees Celsius and above they begin to die. Because bacteria can grow to unsafe levels between 5 degrees and 60 degrees C we call it the **Temperature Danger Zone**. For more information go to our website.

Temperature control applies to made up baby formula and expressed milk as well as other food you prepare. Keep these refrigerated until you are ready to reheat them for baby.

**Remember:**

The mouths of young children and the elderly are easily burned. After you heat the food to steaming hot, you can safely let it cool down by leaving it on the bench for a few minutes before you serve it or feed it to baby.

### Cook food properly

Always cook chicken, rolled and stuffed meats, sausages and minced meat such as hamburger patties so that the juices run clear - there should be no hint of pink in the centre. If you are unsure as to whether these foods have been sufficiently cooked, check that in the thickest part the temperature reaches 75 degrees Celsius or 70 degrees for 2 minutes. Steaks, chops and other whole pieces of meat can be cooked to preference.

This is because a whole piece of meat, such as a steak, has only been handled or open to contamination on the surface. Any bacteria on or near the surface will be easily killed during cooking. When meat is minced, a bone is removed, it is rolled or the muscle is slit for stuffing, bacteria can penetrate into the centre of the meat so it needs to be cooked thoroughly throughout to kill them. Raw chicken and other poultry often contain food poisoning bacteria and also need to be cooked thoroughly right through to the centre.

When reheating food, other than made up formula and breast milk, for vulnerable people, always reheat to a temperature of 75 degrees Celsius or above or to 70 degrees Celsius for at least two minutes. It is a good idea to use a thermometer to check the temperature if you are not sure that a food is hot enough. You can allow it to cool down for a short while before serving it.

**Separate raw and ready to eat food**  
**Keep kitchen and utensils clean**  
**Wash hands thoroughly**

These three rules are to prevent food contamination by bacteria and viruses from raw food, dirty surfaces and equipment and dirty hands. Bacteria and viruses are hitchhikers and they need help to get from one place to another. Most of the time we provide the help when we're careless and allow cross contamination to happen. The end result can be food poisoning.

Cross contamination takes place when bacteria or viruses are transferred from a contaminated surface to a food which is not contaminated. Contamination can come from people, work surfaces or equipment, and other foods. For example, cross contamination can happen when bacteria from the surface of raw meat, poultry and raw vegetables with visible dirt (such as unwashed potatoes), are transferred onto ready to eat food, such as green salad, rice or pasta salads, egg dishes, cakes and desserts, cooked meats or poultry or fruit. They can also be transferred by a knife or chopping board used to cut raw meat and then used to prepare salad vegetables or cut up cooked meat without being properly washed in between; or even by your hands if you don't wash them thoroughly between handling raw meat and preparing the ready to eat food. The bacteria and viruses on the raw food are killed when the food is cooked, but the ready to eat food gets eaten without further cooking – bacteria, viruses and all.

This cross contamination can also happen through contaminated juices from raw meat dripping onto the surface of ready to eat food.

**AND**

Don't prepare food when you are sick yourself or you risk transferring your bacteria or viruses to others.

By remembering these 6 key food safety messages when you prepare food for tiny tummies and sensitive people, you can greatly reduce the risk of their getting food poisoning. But if you regularly cook for a young child, an elderly relative or someone undergoing immune suppressing medical treatment, you should also talk to their doctor or specialist about the precautions you should take. You can also get more detailed information from the Food Safety Information Council website: [www.foodsafety.asn.au](http://www.foodsafety.asn.au)

***Need more information?***

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