



It's a barbeque!

Cooking for family and friends

Having the family and friends round for a barbecue? That's great. It's always fun being outdoors sharing good food and drink with the people you care about. The last thing you want is for it to end with your guests getting sick with food poisoning. Unfortunately, this is too often what happens.

Why does food poisoning happen more often at large gatherings?

The average home kitchen is really not designed for preparing food for large numbers of people. Work surfaces, fridges and barbecues are intended to cater for normal cooking needs for a family - not for preparing large amounts of food.

Food is often transported to another place, which means the food might be kept in the temperature danger zone (5 to 60 ° C) while being brought to the party. Under these warmer conditions any bacteria in the food can multiply rapidly.

To avoid a last minute rush and being too exhausted to enjoy the fun, most people start preparing food earlier in the day. That's fine – non-perishable items, such as nuts, chips can be packed ahead of time because they do not encourage bacteria to grow. Other foods, such as salads can be prepared earlier in the day but need to be carefully prepared, and then covered and refrigerated right away.

Don't be a goose... avoid temperature abuse

Temperature abuse is the major cause of foodborne illness at parties and functions. Remember to minimise the time food stays in the temperature danger zone (5 ° C -60 ° C) by:

- It's Ok to leave cooked meat to remain warm on a corner of the barbecue or covered on a plate for late arrivals. Just ensure it's protected from flies and, as with cold perishables, avoid leaving it around for more than four hours, (or two hours if you are then going to put leftovers back in the fridge).
- Cooling any salads and preprepared foods as quickly as possible so that bacteria can't grow. Make sure that the fridge is still operating at or below 5 ° C – even though you've loaded in all that extra warm food.
- Hastening the cooling process of any hot food by precooling it in its container in a sink of iced or cold water or putting it into shallow containers. Chill or freeze the food in those shallow containers. Deep containers can take days for the centre of the food to reach 5 ° C.
- Keeping cold food cold — make sure the foods you pack into the cooler are at or less than 5 ° C when you load them for transport.

- Thawing any frozen food, especially poultry, sausages and stuffed meats, correctly in the fridge or microwave either the day before or on the day of the BBQ.

The Fridge

Domestic fridges are not very large and an overcrowded fridge or freezer does not allow the cold air to circulate freely around the food so sometimes foods can be inadequately frozen or chilled. When it contains a big load of food, the fridge has to work overtime to cope and, particularly if the weather is hot, the temperature inside will rise.

You should have a fridge thermometer inside the fridge to check that your fridge is operating at the correct temperature (around 4-5 degrees) to stop any bacteria in food from multiplying. At these temperatures food poisoning bacteria will multiply very slowly and the food will remain safe for 2 or 3 days. Check your fridge temperatures first thing in the morning after the food has had a chance to cool and adjust the controls to lower the temperature if necessary.

Loading the fridge

You'll probably have a lot of raw meat and/or poultry and pre-prepared salads, dips and other ready to eat food in the fridge. Always keep raw food below ready to eat food so that the raw juices can't contaminate it.

All meat and poultry should be stored in a leak-proof container (not just in the packaging from the store) and all ready to eat food should be kept covered in the fridge to protect it.

You inevitably will run out of space to allow you to do this properly, particularly if your guests are also bringing food which needs to be refrigerated until you are ready to eat so what should you do?

What can be taken out of the fridge?

- Take out the beer for a start. The drinks can't make you sick if they are inadequately cooled, the food can. You can fill the laundry sink and insulated containers or buckets with ice and keep all the beer and soft drinks chilled.
- Those jars of pickles, chutneys and bottled sauces that have vinegar on the label can come out too because they won't be a problem outside the fridge for a day or so.
- Fruit can survive in the fruit bowl or cupboard as can vegetables, such as cauliflower, which will be cooked before eating.

Packing your cooler

- Put the raw meat in its container at the bottom of the cooler and ready to eat foods, protected by packaging, above it.
- Cut it into serving size pieces at home, it's easier to do it safely at home. There is too much risk of cross contamination when you're out.
- Have all other foods ready to eat, do as much handling at home as you can.
- Pack only foods that have been cooled to 5 ° C or below. Chill them overnight if possible.

- Pack plenty of frozen bricks or gel packs around the food. Frozen drinks thaw quickly in warm weather and act as extra cool bricks.
- Keep the wicker picnic basket for non-perishable items like bread, crackers, nuts, cutlery and napkins.
- If you want to take home left overs, make sure they haven't been at room temperature for more than two hours. If you're at someone's home, ask your hosts to put your ice-bricks or gel packs into the freezer during the party so that you can transport the left-overs home safely. Put leftovers into the fridge as soon as you get home.
- If town water is not available, always boil it before drinking.
- Carry disposable wipes in case there's no water for handwashing, but don't leave them as lying around as litter.

Preparing and cooking the food

Because of the risks inherent in catering for a large group and the fact the food may be at room temperature for longer than normal, you need to be even more careful than usual about preparing the food to prevent any bacteria being introduced by cross contamination.

- Cook poultry, minced meats, sausages and other pre-prepared meats until well done, right through to the centre. No pink should be left visible. Steaks and other solid pieces of meat can be cooked to taste.
- Have a clean plate and clean utensils ready to receive the cooked meat – not the ones which were used for the raw meat.
- Do not allow food to cool on the bench. As soon as steam stops rising, refrigerate or freeze in a leak-proof container
- Wash your hands, chopping boards, knives and anything else which will come into contact with the food before you start preparation and between preparing raw and ready to eat foods
- Don't prepare food if you're feeling unwell or have gastroenteritis.

Nibbles

Keep salads, pates, spreads, dips and other perishable products in the fridge or cooler until needed. It may seem like a great idea to leave food out so that guests can nibble throughout the party, but unfortunately bacteria will also have a feast. It's better to divide these higher risk perishable foods into small amounts and replenish with fresh portions as required. Don't mix fresh top-ups with ones that have been outside for some time. Low risk foods, e.g. nuts, crisps, crackers, etc. can be topped up.

And for safety's sake remember the 6 key tips.....

- Keep hot food steaming hot
- Keep cold food refrigerated
- Cook food properly

- Separate raw and cooked foods
- Keep kitchen and utensils clean
- Wash hands with soap and dry thoroughly

Need more information?

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October 2003