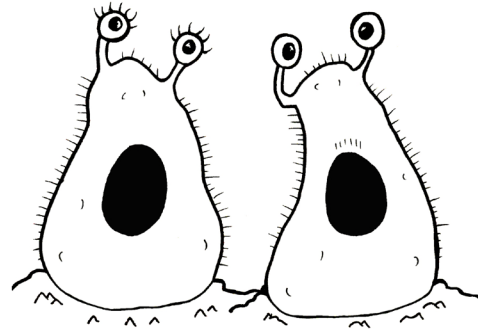


FOOD SAFETY: HOW TO HANDLE FOOD SAFELY



WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO HANDLE FOOD SAFELY?

Every year, tens of thousands of people in the UK go to their doctor with some sort of food poisoning, and that's only the reported figure; the real figure is probably much higher. Most of us probably know what food poisoning feels like: stomach cramps, sickness and an upset stomach if you're lucky, and a trip to the hospital if you're unlucky.



Bacteria are everywhere. Some of them are good – like the bacterium that turns milk into yoghurt – but a lot of them are bad, and it's this kind that gives us food poisoning. The more bad bacteria there are around, the more likely we are to get sick.

HOW CAN YOU AVOID FOOD POISONING?

It's pretty much impossible to stamp out bacteria completely, but you can minimise the conditions they need to grow and multiply: food, moisture, warmth and time.

Make sure you cover food up to stop bacteria in the air landing on it, and finding the food it needs to grow. Everything should be well wrapped and cooked food should be covered as soon as it's cooled down.

Food stuffs that bacteria particularly like to grow on are:

- raw fish
- raw meat
- dairy products
- cooked food of any sort, including soups, stocks and stews
- cooked starchy things like rice, pasta and beans



THE BEAUTY OF THE FRIDGE

Keeping things in the fridge deprives bacteria of the warmth they need to multiply. And remember, the more time bacteria has to multiply, the more of them there'll be. When you get back from the shops, make sure you get any refrigerated or frozen goods stored away as soon as possible.

Bacteria thrives between 8°C and 75°C – keep food hot if you need to, at above 75°C, and make sure you get leftovers in the fridge as soon as they've cooled down.

When defrosting food, always make sure it has thawed thoroughly before cooking, otherwise you're at higher risk of food poisoning – during cooking the food may not reach a high enough internal temperature to kill bacteria.

This is why it's really important to check that food is cooked right through to the middle. It's especially true with meat, it may look 'done' from the outside but there's a high chance it may be undercooked or even raw on the inside if it hasn't been defrosted properly first.

The best habit to get into is defrosting food in a fridge overnight, ensuring it's well covered. Always refer to food packaging labels for further instructions on defrosting.

It's also important to wait for food to cool down to room temperature before it goes in the fridge. This helps to conserve energy, as your fridge doesn't have to work so hard to maintain a cool temperature. Just make sure food is loosely covered so flies and other bugs can't get to it as it cools.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT CANS, BOTTLES AND JARS?

Sealed jars, bottles and cans don't need to go in the fridge because they've been pasteurised. This is a heat-treating process that kills any germs inside. If you check the best before date on the bottom, it may be quite far off, but once that item is open, you need to treat the food as if it's fresh again (see *Understanding shelf life*).

Anything you don't use should be stored in the fridge and used within a couple of days. If it's in a can, transfer it to a bowl or Tupperware container first – once cans are open to the air, they can react with food.

REMEMBER You can't see, smell or feel bacteria, so you have to be proactive in avoiding it – it won't warn you of its presence, you have to anticipate it!