

Food safety when shopping

Even if food producers and sellers have followed the food safety laws, the quality and safety of your food can be affected by how you handle it. Once you purchase food, the safety of that food is your responsibility. When shopping for food, you should choose, pack and transport it carefully to make sure it stays safe to eat.

Some people are more at risk of food poisoning than others. Vulnerable groups include pregnant women, young children, the elderly and anyone with an illness. Take special care when buying, storing and preparing food for these people.

Choose your food carefully

Australia produces some of the most wholesome and safe food in the world. However, the quality and safety of some food can be affected by poor storage and packaging. Choose food carefully when shopping.

Never buy:

- Dented, swollen or leaking cans or containers
- Products with damaged or imperfect packaging
- Cracked or dirty eggs
- Chilled or frozen foods that have been left out of the refrigerator
- Products that are soiled or mouldy
- Ready-to-eat foods left uncovered on counters
- Hot food, like takeaways, which are not steaming hot
- Anything where you have doubts about the quality.

Take special care with high-risk foods

Food-poisoning bacteria grow and multiply on some types of food more easily than on others. These high-risk foods include:

- Raw and cooked meat, including poultry such as chicken and turkey, and foods containing these, such as casseroles, curries and lasagne
- Dairy products, such as custard and dairy based desserts like custard tarts and cheesecake
- Eggs and egg products, such as quiche
- Smallgoods such as hams and salamis
- Seafood, such as seafood salad, patties, fish balls, stews containing seafood and fish stock
- Cooked rice and pasta
- Prepared salads like coleslaws, pasta salads and rice salads
- Prepared fruit salads
- Ready to eat foods, including sandwiches, rolls, and pizza that contain any of the food above.

High-risk foods should be kept out of the temperature danger zone (5 °C to 60 °C). Keep food at 5 °C or below or at 60 °C and above. When you buy high-risk foods, try to minimise the time they spend in the temperature danger zone by packing them properly and taking them home immediately.

Check the dates on the packaging

Always check the date marked on perishable foods, especially chilled or frozen items. A 'use-by' date shows the date by which a product should be consumed. It should not be sold after this date. A 'best before' date indicates the date until which the food will remain at its best quality. It can be sold after this date.

Plan your shopping trip

Some hints for shopping safely:

- Always pick up your frozen or chilled foods towards the end of your shopping trip.
- Buy hot chickens and other hot food later in your trip and keep it separate from cold food.
- Prevent meat, chicken or fish juices leaking onto other products.
- Check that the staff use separate tongs/utensils or methods when handling different food types if you are buying from a deli.
- Wash your reusable shopping bags regularly, or if they become soiled by food liquids.

Transporting food home

If you have purchased hot, chilled or frozen foods, you should get them home as quickly as possible. For trips longer than about 30 minutes, or on very hot days, it's a good idea to put chilled or frozen foods in a cooler or insulated bag to keep food cold. Once you arrive home, immediately put chilled or frozen foods into your fridge or freezer.

Where to get help

- Your local council health department
- Food Safety Hotline Tel. 1300 364 352

Things to remember

- Never buy any product if you are unsure about its quality or safety.
- Check the dates on packaging.
- Once you purchase chilled or frozen food, get it home and into the fridge or freezer as quickly as possible.
- Try to keep high-risk foods out of the 'temperature danger zone' of between 5 °C and 60 °C.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DH - RHP&R - Health Protection - Food Safety and Regulation

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