

Is It Time for a 'Fridge Fix' in Your Household?

Have you given your fridge a good once-over lately? It's easy to let things go and end up with fuzzy cheese, slimy lettuce and ancient artifacts that used to be condiments. The shared refrigerator at work may need a "fridge fix" too. It can get scary in there if no one monitors it.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that the average American suffers from foodborne illness about once every five years. Food poisoning occurs in private homes three times more often than outside the home. Fortunately, you can keep your family safe from most food-related illness by following simple food-handling precautions.

Here are some "fridge fix" safety tips:

- 1. Toss old items.** A good rule of thumb is to do a food safety check at least every three months. Starting at the top of the fridge, take everything off one shelf at a time and toss expired items. Don't forget the door, where most condiments are stored.
- 2. Scrub it down.** While the shelf is empty, wash all surfaces with warm, soapy water, dry completely and put the food back. Research shows that vegetable bins, meat drawers and the bottom shelf are usually the most bacteria-laden areas.
- 3. Keep it cool.** Install a refrigerator thermometer if you don't have one. Make sure the temperature stays below 40 degrees Fahrenheit at all times. The danger zone for food spoilage is 40-140 degrees. To maintain low temperatures and prevent condensation and mold, make sure the seals are snug on fridge and freezer doors. Properly sealed doors should stay closed when gently tugged.

4. Stash it right. Research shows that nearly half of Americans store food improperly. When raw meats, poultry and fish are insufficiently wrapped or handled carelessly, bacterial contamination of other foods and refrigerator surfaces can occur, leading to foodborne illness. High-protein foods and dairy products are especially susceptible to spoilage when stored too long or at improper temperatures.

5. Manage leftovers. Even when stashed in the fridge right away, foods only keep a limited time.

6. Wash up. After preparing raw meat, fish or eggs, wash hands, utensils, and kitchen surfaces with hot, soapy water. Toss dishcloths and towels into the laundry and put out clean ones.

7. Cook it well. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of everything you cook. Insert tip about two inches into thickest part of the food to take the reading.

8. Buy small for better quality. Consider buying smaller condiment containers that can be used before they go bad, especially if you live alone or have a small family. Over time, foods lose quality through changes in texture, flavor or color, making them inedible. They are not unsafe, but health benefits decrease because antioxidants and vitamins in the food may lose potency. It's tempting to purchase larger sizes or to stock up during sales, but as good stewards, we should buy only what we can use before the expiration dates.

Here are some guidelines for high-risk foods:

Raw meat: Wrap tightly so juices don't drip onto other foods. Store on the bottom shelf separate from ready-to-eat foods like fruits.

Milk and eggs: Store in cabinet of the fridge, not on the door where the temperature is usually warmer. Leave eggs in the original carton.

Leftovers: Cover tightly and refrigerate promptly. It's a good idea to write the date on leftovers so you know how old they are.

Use this chart to tell how long to keep leftovers:

Cooked nuggets and patties keep 1-2 days.

Cooked seafood keeps 2 days.

Cooked ham, beef, pork, poultry, meat casseroles, soups, stews, pasta and veggies keep up to 3-4 days.

Deli meats keep 3-5 days.

Cooked rice keeps 1 week.

Condiments

Mayonnaise: Keep up to 2 months.

Salad dressings: Keep up to 3 months.

Ketchup: Keep up to 6 months.

Mustard: Keep up to 6-8 months.

Jams, jellies, syrup keep up to 6-8 months.

Do you know what's in your refrigerator? Perhaps it's time for a "fridge fix."

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