

When it comes to food, be safe not sorry

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Experts offer advice to ensure healthy eating.

(HealthDay)—Keeping up on food safety and nutrition can be confusing: One day a food is reported as good for you, and the next a study finds that it's not so healthy after all. It also can be frightening when a foodborne illness outbreak occurs.

But eating isn't optional. So, [food](#) safety and nutrition experts offer their best advice on what you need to know to eat healthily and safely.

1. Rely on thermometers.

If there's one message Tina Hanes, a registered dietician and nurse with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service, wants you to remember, it's to check the temperature of your foods with a thermometer.

"Color and texture aren't reliable indicators of how safe a food is," said Hanes. "You have to use a food thermometer to ensure that food is cooked to a safe temperature." For whole cuts of beef, pork or lamb, that means cooking them to a minimum of 145 degrees F and letting them rest for three minutes when they come out of the oven. All poultry, including ground poultry, should be cooked to 165 degrees F. Ground meats should be cooked to 160 degrees F.

The best way to take the temperature of such foods as hamburger or chicken breast is to go in through the side to the thickest part of the meat. Hanes suggests using oven-safe [thermometers](#) or instant-read thermometers designed for meat.

2. Carbohydrates and gluten may not be your enemy.

For some time, [dieters](#) have been shunning carbohydrates, and the latest food craze appears to be forgoing gluten, a protein found in wheat. People with celiac disease, an [autoimmune condition](#) that affects a person's ability to process gluten safely, definitely need to avoid gluten. But, according to Amy Frasier, a registered dietitian with Bastyr University in Kenmore, Wash., there's no evidence that people who do not have [celiac disease](#) or a [gluten sensitivity](#) will benefit from a gluten-free diet.

Along the same vein, dieters who've been trying to stay away from carbohydrates should make sure they're not missing out on vital nutrients. "Carbohydrates are the primary source of energy for the human body," Frasier said. "Many carbohydrate foods provide us with essential nutrients. Refined carbohydrates such as sugars, candy and processed grains can be very low in nutrients, but other carbohydrates can be exceptionally good for the body, such as vegetables, fruits and whole grains like quinoa, brown rice and barley."

3. Leave it.

You might have heard of the "five-second rule." Some people say that if you drop food on the floor and pick it up quickly—within five seconds—it's still safe to eat.

Not so, said Frasier. "Bacteria can adhere to food immediately upon contact," she said. Thus, from a food safety standpoint, the five-second rule is a myth.

4. Keep it separate.

You also may have heard that you should keep raw meat and produce separate, and that it's a good idea to have separate cutting boards for each. But have you ever thought about the things that might be contaminating your countertops and tables?

"In my house, nothing goes on the counter—no purses, no school bags," said Cheryl Luptowski, a public information officer with NSF International, a nonprofit safety organization. "It's just not a good idea to put anything that was sitting on a floor somewhere on your counter or kitchen table."

She also said people who use reusable bags should make sure they have separate bags for groceries and other items. And, she said, all grocery bags should be washable.

5. Ponder produce selections.

Are organic foods worth the extra cost? Frasier said that results from studies on the nutritional content of organic produce have been mixed, so it's not clear if they provide any extra nutritional benefit. However,

these foods do provide a clear benefit for reducing exposure to pesticides and additives in your foods.

And, whether organically grown or not, have you ever wondered if it's really safe to eat prepackaged salads, baby carrots and more? Hanes said that if the products are labeled as "ready to eat" or "prewashed," they should be safe to eat right out of the bag.

6. Watch the time.

When you're out shopping, keep an eye on how long you let perishable foods sit in your car. During the winter, when temperatures are below 40 degrees F, you have considerable leeway, Luptowski noted. But on hot summer days, you have less than an hour to get your food home.

Hanes recommends putting a cooler in the car if you know you're going to be out for a bit. Better yet, both experts said, make the grocery store your last stop and pick up perishable foods at the end of your shopping trip.

If you lose your power, food in the fridge (if it's been closed) will generally stay safe for about four hours. How long food in the freezer lasts depends on how full your freezer is. In a half-full freezer, food will stay frozen for about 24 hours, Hanes said, but in a full freezer, it might stay frozen up to 48 hours.

7. Skip the energy buzz.

Energy drinks often contain large doses of caffeine and other stimulants, but these products aren't regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "Mega doses of caffeine from any source can have harmful side effects," said Frasier. "Also, little research has been done

to show the impacts of combining caffeine with other stimulant ingredients included in many energy drinks."

Children, pregnant women and anyone with high blood pressure or heart disease should avoid these drinks, she said.

"Consumers should consider why they are low in energy and using energy drinks in the first place," Frasier said. "A balanced diet, regular exercise, stress reduction and adequate sleep should reduce the need for energy drink consumption."

8. Clean it.

Many people use their kitchen sponges for a variety of tasks, which often makes the kitchen sponge the germiest thing in a kitchen, said Luptowski. But, she said, "you can prolong the life of your sponge by wetting it, and then microwaving it for two minutes to kill the germs."

She also recommends having separate sponges for human dishes and dog bowls because, contrary to popular belief, Fido's mouth just isn't very clean.

If you've prepared food that could potentially harbor bacteria, such as raw meat, Luptowski suggested running your dishwasher on the sanitizing cycle. The cycle takes longer and uses more energy, but it ensures that any pathogens are killed. Those who don't have a dishwasher, she said, can sanitize dishes by washing them in hot, soapy water, then dunking them in a gallon of hot water with a capful of bleach in it and then rinsing the dishes.

More information: The U.S. government website FoodSafety.gov has more on [food safety](#).

To read about one reporter's near-fatal bout of food poisoning, click [here](#)

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