

USDA'S Meat and Poultry Hotline Presents the Top 10 Reasons to Handle Your Food Safely

On July 1, 1994, USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline began its tenth year as a toll-free public service. Consumers with food safety questions may call the hotline any time (the staff is available from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern Time; recorded messages are available other times) with questions on the safe handling of meat and poultry products.

In honor of the occasion, the hotline presents its "Top 10 Reasons to Handle Your Food Safely."

NUMBER 10: Safe food handling practices are the ones most likely to preserve food's peak quality.

Keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold inhibits growth of the microorganisms that can spoil your food or make you ill. Storage at the proper temperature also retains the fresh appearance, pleasant aroma and agreeable texture that contribute so strongly to an enjoyable dining experience.

NUMBER 9: Safe food handling lets you enjoy to the fullest the nutritional benefits of food.

If you've taken the time to carefully select a variety of healthful foods, why not use them up — or properly preserve them for long-term storage — while nutrient levels are at their peak? Foods that must be discarded due to decay or temperature abuse nourish no one.

NUMBER 8: The safest ways to handle food are usually the most efficient.

Don't take chances in the name of saving time. Thawing meat and poultry products at room temperature and partial cooking are examples of practices which can seem like good ideas, but that may actually encourage bacterial growth by keeping food in the "danger zone" (40°-140 °F.) where bacteria multiply fastest. In the case of bacteria that produce heat-resistant toxins, this becomes a problem that further cooking can't fix.

NUMBER 7: Safe food handling is easy. You set a good example for others, including your children.

You are the last person to handle your food before it is eaten. You may be the last person to handle food before it is served to your family or friends. Take charge! Prevention of illness may be as simple as washing your hands — an often-neglected but VERY important act.

NUMBER 6: Safe food handling inspires confidence and keeps peace in the family.

Imagine: No more family feuds because someone handled dinner in a questionable fashion. And family and friends won't call the Meat and Poultry Hotline begging to have food safety literature mailed to your address!

NUMBER 5: Safe food handling can enhance your standing in the community.

Food for a concession stand, bake sale or church supper must be carefully prepared. Many of those in your community are very young, elderly, or suffering from health problems that affect the immune system. These folks are at increased risk for foodborne illness. Protect their health and the reputation of your organization.

NUMBER 4: Safe food handling is the responsible thing to do.

Those for whom you prepare food deserve the best, and you expect no less from those who produce and prepare food for you. You are no less important than the manufacturer, government regulator, or grocer in assuring food safety. You are an important link in the farm-to-table chain.

NUMBER 3: Safe food handling saves money.

Foodborne illness costs billions each year in health care costs and lost wages. It's hard to throw away food you know has been mishandled. But compare the cost of the food to the cost of a bad case of food poisoning, starting with the doctor's bill!

NUMBER 2: By handling food safely, you will spare yourself and your family from a painful bout of illness.

Bacterial, parasitic or viral illness caused by food is no fun, and it can have long-term consequences.

Should we fear food? No. Microscopic organisms have always been and will always be an important part of our world. But we must store foods properly, cook them thoroughly and keep our hands and work areas clean. Sometimes, what you can't see can hurt you.

Which brings us to the...

NUMBER 1 REASON TO HANDLE YOUR FOOD SAFELY: It may save a life.