

Food Safety at Barbecues and Picnics



Outdoor barbecues and picnics are a great way to connect with family and friends. However, careless food handling could cause foodborne illness and quickly make you an unpopular host. Taking just a few simple steps can greatly reduce the risk of sickness. These tips will help ensure that your food stays safe and your guests stay healthy.

Stay Out of the Danger Zone!

Just like humans, bacteria thrive in temperatures that are not too hot or too cold. *The “danger zone” is 40 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit.* Dangerous bacteria are more likely to grow in this temperature range. **Keep cold foods below 40°F and hot foods above 140°F.**

Thaw Appropriately

Frozen meat should never be thawed at room temperature. Instead, thaw in the refrigerator ahead of time. If it's last minute, submerge sealed packages in cold (not warm or hot) water, or thaw in the microwave. Thoroughly cook foods immediately after microwave thawing.

Marinate Well

Marinating meat can improve tenderness, juiciness, and flavor. Always marinate food in the refrigerator, not on the countertop. If you plan to use the marinade as a baste during grilling, reserve some for basting before you put the raw meat in it. Discard marinade as soon as you take the meat out of it.

Precook Wisely

Precooked meats such as hot dogs, smoked sausages, chicken breasts, or burgers are great options that are available at many retail stores. Simply follow the package instructions for reheating on the grill. If you precook foods yourself, make sure they go immediately on the grill; don't hold them at room temperature before putting on the grill.

Use Coolers Properly

When picnicking or tailgating away from home, use a cooler to store anything that was refrigerated. Fill it

just before leaving home, add plenty of ice, and don't open the cooler repeatedly; it makes the ice melt faster. Consider having a separate tub or cooler for drinks to avoid repeatedly opening the cooler with perishable foods. Always separate raw meat from ready-to-eat foods like salads and desserts. Try to keep the cooler in a shaded area to maintain temperature more efficiently.

Cook to Temp

Digital food thermometers can be purchased for around \$10, and they're easy to use and read. Consider them an easy and inexpensive way to both prevent foodborne illness and make sure you don't overcook your steaks. The thermometer should be placed in the center of the food, not touching bones or big pieces of fat or gristle. Use the cooking temperatures chart to determine when different meat products are safe.

Safe Internal Temperatures for Meat and Poultry Products	
Product	Safe internal temperature (degrees Fahrenheit)
Poultry (chicken or turkey): whole birds, breast meat, legs, thighs, wings	165
Ground poultry (chicken/turkey)	165
Fish	145
Pork chops, roasts, ribs	145 plus 3 minutes standing time
Lamb chops, roasts	145 plus 3 minutes standing time
Beef steaks, roasts	145 plus 3 minutes standing time
Ground beef, pork, lamb	160
Source: www.fsis.usda.gov	

Serve Safely

Keep cold foods cold by placing the bowl of food inside of a slightly larger bowl filled with ice. Keep hot foods hot on the grill (not directly over the coals) and with crock pots, chafing dishes, or “beer baths.” To make a beer bath, fill a pan with beer, juice, broth, or other liquid, and place it on the grill; after cooking burgers, chicken, or brats, place them in the hot liquid to keep the food hot and add extra flavor.

A general rule of thumb is never to leave perishable items out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours, or for more than 1 hour when the outside temperature is above 90°F. Here in Mississippi, the summer temperature can soar above 90°F for weeks on end. It's important to make sure food is not left out more than an hour on these hot days. The food will not only be safer, but it will also look better and taste fresher. In hotter months, consider holding your gathering in the evening hours, when temperatures cool off and your guests may be more comfortable.

Also consider adding nonperishable items to your picnic. Whole fruits like grapes, apples, bananas, oranges, peaches, and cherry tomatoes, along with crackers, pretzels, nuts, chips, breads, and cookies can be added to the menu and don't have to take up valuable cooler space. However, cut or pre-peeled fruits and vegetables should always be kept cool, and you should follow the same handling guidelines for other refrigerated items.

Handle Leftovers Correctly

Put food in the refrigerator, freezer, or cooler within 2 hours if the temperature outside is less than 90°F, or within 1 hour if the temperature is above 90°F. If foods stay out for too long, or if you are unsure whether or not they are safe, discard them.

Reheat leftovers to 165°F.

Clean Thoroughly

Never put cooked meat or other foods on the same plate that held raw meat. That raw meat juice contains bacteria that will recontaminate your food. Don't want to wash double dishes? Use disposables for raw and cooked foods. Always wash your hands after handling raw meat and before you touch cooked meat.

If you are away from home, make sure you have a potable water source for cleanup, or bring containers from home if necessary. Supplement water with antibacterial wipes for cleaning tables and other surfaces, and consider using disposable containers and utensils, especially for raw items.

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