

Health & Safety for Caregivers

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Preventing Food Borne Illness in the Child Care Environment

Food borne illness can easily happen in the child care environment if proper care is not taken to prepare, serve, and store food safely. When foods are not handled properly, harmful bacteria are allowed to grow to unsafe levels, and when the food is eaten, it can cause young children in your care to become sick. Food borne illness is often mistaken for the flu because the symptoms of illness are similar. Those who become ill may have diarrhea, vomiting, an upset stomach, fever, or cramps.

Infants and children are at high risk for food borne illness because their immune systems are not well developed and cannot fight disease and illness as well as adults. Also, some harmful bacteria are killed by natural stomach acids, but because infants and young children produce less acid in their stomachs they can become sick easier. Food borne illness can lead to serious complications and even death in young children.

Special care must be taken to insure that the foods prepared and served to infants and children are safe from harmful bacteria. Handling food safely is the best way to prevent food borne illness. Food needs to be cared for safely from the time it is purchased at the grocery until it is served and eaten.

When Shopping

- Only buy as much food as you can safely store.
- Plan your trip through the grocery store so that you pick up perishable items such as milk and other cold foods last.
- Place meat in a plastic bag to prevent drippings from contaminating other foods. Keep meats separate from fruits and vegetables in the grocery cart.
- Always check the "use by" date and never purchase food in damaged containers.
- Do other shopping and run errands before going to the grocery store. Go home immediately after grocery shopping, and put cold foods into the refrigerator or freezer as soon as you get home.

Storing Food

- Make sure your refrigerator is kept clean and maintains a temperature of 40 degrees Fahrenheit or slightly below.
- Foods in your freezer should be frozen solid.
- Store canned goods and other nonperishable food items in a cool, dry place and rotate so that you use the older food items first.
- Store flours, cereals, cornmeal, sugars, and dry beans in tightly-covered containers to protect them from insects and mice.

Wash Hands and Surfaces Often

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before handling food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, handling raw meat, coughing or sneezing into your hand, taking care of a sick child, smoking, or handling pets.

- Teach children to take time to wash their hands after using the bathroom, before and after eating, and after playing with dirty objects or pets.
- Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter tops with hot soapy water after preparing each food and before going on to the next food.
- Use paper towels to dry hands and clean up kitchen surfaces to prevent spreading bacteria. If you use cloth towels, wash them often in the hot water cycle of your washing machine.

Prepare Foods Safely

- Use a plastic or other nonporous cutting board and thoroughly wash it in hot soapy water or run it through the dishwasher after use. If possible, use a separate cutting board for meats to prevent cross contamination.
- Thoroughly wash fruits and vegetables in plain water before preparing or eating.
- Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator, not on the counter. Food can be thawed in the microwave oven safely, but it must be cooked immediately.
- Do not allow hot foods to cool on the kitchen counter; put them directly into the refrigerator. Large amounts of hot cooked foods such as pots of soups, stews, or chili, should be divided into several shallow containers (less than 3 inches deep) and placed directly into the refrigerator to cool.

Cook Foods to Proper Temperatures

- Use a thermometer to make sure meat, poultry, casseroles, and other foods are cooked thoroughly.
- Cook eggs until the yolks and whites are firm. Don't use recipes in which eggs remain raw or partially cooked.
- Cook roasts, steaks, and chops to 170 degrees F, which is well done.
- Cook poultry to 180 degrees F.
- Cook ground beef to at least 160 degrees F. Never serve or eat ground beef that is still pink.
- Fish should be opaque and flake easily with a fork.
- Bring sauces, soups, and gravy to a boil when reheating, and heat leftovers to 165 degrees F.

Serve Foods Safely

- Always serve food on clean plates with clean utensils and clean hands.
- Serve hot foods hot and cold foods cold.
- Never allow perishable foods to sit at room temperature for more than two hours, or one hour in very hot weather. Bacteria that can cause food poisoning grow quickly in warm temperatures.
- Refrigerate leftovers as soon as the meal is over. Use leftovers within a couple of days, or freeze and use within two to three months.
- Do not allow children to eat raw cookie dough or other uncooked batters containing eggs.
- Do not allow people with infected cuts or sores, colds, or other infectious diseases to prepare or serve foods.

If Ever in Doubt, Throw It Out!

Sometimes you cannot tell if a food is spoiled or unsafe to eat by the taste, smell, or appearance of the food. You may not know if the food was handled, cooked, or stored properly. If you are unsure whether a food is safe to eat, the best rule of safety is to throw it out. Don't take any chances; it is not worth the risk of making a child in your care sick.

References

Keeping Kids Safe: A Guide for Safe Food Handling and Sanitation for Child Care Providers, USDA, July 1999.
Fight BAC: Four Simple Steps to Food Safety, USDA.