

Handle Your Take-Out Foods with Caution

With more and more families trying to juggle work and extra-curricular activities, it is no wonder that take-out and delivered foods are becoming increasingly popular. We have come to rely on others to prepare our food.

Foods from the drive-through are usually consumed as soon as you get home. Take-out foods could consist of foods that you purchase in advance and plan to eat later, such as party platters or a complete cooked meal.

Maintaining Proper Food Temperatures

If you have purchased food for the family, and they haven't made it home for dinner, then you need to keep the foods at the correct temperatures. Maintaining proper food temperature is important not only for food quality, but for food safety as well. Once the food is cooked, it should be kept hot at an internal temperature of 140 degrees F or above. Just keeping food warm is not safe.

If you plan to eat later, it will probably be necessary to divide the meal into smaller portions or pieces, place in shallow containers, and refrigerate.

Foods that are intended to be served cold should be kept at 40 degrees F or below. Refrigerate your perishable foods as soon as possible, but always within two hours of purchase or delivery.

If food has been delivered or picked up and will be put on a buffet table, be sure to keep it cold by nesting several serving dishes of food in bowls of ice. Use small platters and replace them with fresh refrigerated platters of food often, rather than adding fresh food to a serving dish already on the table.

Because it is football season, you may be purchasing foods for a tailgating party. Remember to keep a cooler packed with plenty of ice or frozen gel packs. If necessary, keep the cooler in the shade. It is best to keep a separate cooler for items such as soft drinks, so that the cooler can be opened continually without spoiling any food.

The Two-Hour Rule and the Five-Day Rule

Once your family has eaten, it is important to discard all perishable foods, such as eggs, meat, poultry, and casseroles that have been left at room temperature for more than two hours, or one hour if the temperature is above 90 degrees F. Some exceptions to this rule are foods such as cookies, crackers, breads, and whole fruits.

Leftovers should be refrigerated or frozen in shallow containers, wrapped, or with closed lids because the food should always be covered. No food, especially luncheon meats and protein-based salads such as tuna, macaroni, or egg, should stay in the refrigerator for longer than five days.

I know that some of you may be thinking that this is wasteful, and as long as the food has been kept in the refrigerator, it is still good to eat. The truth is that food stored longer than the five days maximum may begin to spoil or become unsafe to eat. You can't taste bacteria, which can contribute to food-borne illness, so for the safety of yourself and your family, it is best to not taste the food.

Re-heating Leftovers

If you have properly stored the foods after eating, then it may be possible to reheat them. Foods containing meat or poultry should be reheated to an internal temperature of 165 degrees F. Reheat sauces, soups and gravies to a boil. If you plan on reheating the foods in the oven, do not set the temperature any lower than 325 degrees F. Re-heating in chafing dishes and slow cookers is not recommended due to the length of time foods may remain in the temperature "danger zone."

Tried and True Tip:

Proper handling of food and leftovers is essential to ensure the food is safe for you and your family. Take the extra minutes required to follow food safety guidelines.

If you would like to receive a free copy of *Safe Handling of Take-Out Foods* contact the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service at 870-779-3609, in the Miller County Courthouse at 400 Laurel, Suite 215, in Texarkana, or e-mail me at Chaley@uaex.edu.

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