THE NEW BOSTON COOKING SCHOOL

Cooking Safety

NOTES

Some basic sanitation and safety practices can dramatically reduce the risk of food-borne illness. Here's what you need to know.

Wash Hands
Washing your hands is one of the best ways to stop the spread of food-borne pathogens. Wash them before and during cooking, especially after touching raw meat or poultry. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends washing for at least 20 seconds in warm, soapy water. How long is that? Try singing "Happy Birthday" from beginning to end twice.

Put Up Barriers
Items that come in contact with both raw and cooked food, like scales and platters, should be covered with aluminum foil or plastic wrap to create a protective barrier. Once the item has been used, the foil—and any bacteria—should be discarded. Similarly, wrapping your cutting board with plastic wrap before pounding meat or poultry on it will limit the spread of bacteria.

Don't Rinse Raw Meat or Poultry
Avoid rinsing raw meat and poultry, as doing so is likely to spread contaminants around your sink. The only exception is brined food, which needs to be rinsed before cooking. In this case, once the brined food is rinsed, be sure to clean and sanitize the sink and surrounding areas. Cooking food to a safe internal temperature will kill surface bacteria more effectively than rinsing.

Season Safely
Though most bacteria can't live for more than a few minutes in direct contact with salt (which quickly dehydrates bacteria, leading to death), they can live on the edges of a salt box or shaker. To avoid contamination, we grind pepper into a small bowl and mix it with salt (using a ratio of 1 part pepper to 4 parts kosher salt or 2 parts table salt). This way, we can reach into the bowl for seasoning without having to wash our hands every time we touch the meat. Afterward, the bowl goes right into the dishwasher.

Don't Recycle Used Marinades
It may seem economical to reuse marinades, but used marinade is contaminated with raw meat juice and is therefore unsafe to consume. If you want a sauce to serve with cooked meat, make a little extra marinade and set it aside before adding the rest to the raw meat.

Avoid the Danger Zone
Most bacteria thrive between 40 and 140 degrees. Within this "danger zone," bacteria double about every 20 minutes, quickly reaching harmful levels. As a general rule, food shouldn't stay in this zone for more than two hours (one hour if the room temperature is over 90 degrees).

Sanitize Your Sink
Studies have found that the kitchen sink is crawling with even more bacteria than the garbage bin. The faucet handle, which can reintroduce bacteria to your hands after you've washed them, is a close second. Though we've found that hot soapy water is amazingly effective at eliminating bacteria, for added insurance, clean these areas frequently with a solution of 1 tablespoon bleach per quart of water (the bleach will also kill off some of those microbes in the drain).

Keep Clean Sponges
The wet environment of a sponge makes it an ideal host for bacteria; whenever possible, use a paper towel or dishcloth instead. If you do use a sponge, disinfect it. To find the best method, we tried microwaving, freezing, bleaching, and boiling the sponge, as well as running it through the dishwasher and simply washing in soap and water. Lab results showed that microwaving and boiling were most effective, reducing bacteria counts from the millions to an impressive 1,000. Since sponges have been known to catch fire in a high-powered microwave, we prefer to boil them for 5 minutes.

Clean Cutting Boards
Keeping cutting boards clean is a major part of preventing cross-contamination and killing harmful bacteria. We've conducted a number of tests to see if any particular cutting-board material is better than another at resisting bacteria growth. While bamboo boards do have natural antimicrobial properties that help kill off bacteria (providing a head start on cleaning), all of the materials we tested came perfectly clean when scrubbed thoroughly with hot, soapy water. If your board is dishwasher-safe, you can put it through the dishwasher, but keep in mind that wooden boards should never go through the dishwasher.