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Senior Wellness Series

## Food Safety at the Grocery Store

FACT SHEET 04-30



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## Food Safety at the Grocery Store

Seniors have years of experience and a strong background in the areas of food shopping and consumption. However, the way food is produced, distributed, prepared, and even eaten has changed dramatically in recent years. This has created a number of crucial food safety issues that could lead to serious illness, even death. Taking a few simple precautions can prevent these foodborne illnesses.

Consider these facts:

- Grocery stores stock food from all over the world.
- Restaurant meals, carry-out, and food prepared outside the home, account for 50% of money spent on food.
- New information is constantly being discovered about dangerous bacteria in food and the illnesses it can cause.
- Older adults are more susceptible and considered “at-risk” for foodborne illnesses.

### What is Food Poisoning?

Food poisoning is often referred to as a **foodborne illness**. The main causes are bacteria and viruses. Some of the more common names are: **Salmonella, E. coli, and Hepatitis A**. When food becomes contaminated with bacteria or viruses that cause foodborne illness, a person can become ill by eating the food.

Each year in the United States 3,000 people die from food poisoning. Older adults have a greater risk of death from eating tainted foods than younger adults. Other serious complications include arthritis, blood poisoning, liver disease, meningitis, kidney failure, strokes and seizures.

Foodborne illness can occur within 24 hours of eating contaminated food, or even days or weeks later. Common symptoms of foodborne illness include: **diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and fever**. The most common symptom is diarrhea. Most cases of foodborne illness never get diagnosed because symptoms are mistaken for the flu. The Centers for Disease Control estimates 48 million people each year get sick by eating contaminated food.

### Foodborne illness can be prevented.

Some food is contaminated before we purchase it. Food can also become contaminated when we transport, store, prepare, or serve it. These are food safety areas that we as consumers control. It is important to use food safety techniques during every stage that we have contact with food.

**Prevention starts with your trip to the grocery store.**

## Plan Your Trip

- ▶ Select your packaged and canned foods first.
- ▶ Shop for meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, milk, eggs, and frozen food last so that these foods spend less time in your shopping cart, warming up to room temperature.



### Avoid the Food Safety Temperature “Danger Zone”

Meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, milk, and eggs are potentially hazardous because they are moist, rich in nutrients, and low in acid. This is exactly the right combination that sets the stage for bacteria to grow. All these foods need for dangerous bacteria to grow rapidly now is, warmth.

“Warmth” in the context of food safety is any temperature **above 40° F and below 140° F**. This is the food safety temperature “**danger zone.**” Leaving perishable foods in the temperature *danger zone too long allows bacteria and viruses to multiply enough to cause illness.*

At the grocery store, the storage refrigerators should keep foods cooler than 40° F.

**USDA Meat and Poultry Hot Line 1-800-535-4555**



## Shopping Safety

- ▶ Buy pasteurized milk, cheese, ciders, and juices.
- ▶ Choose eggs that are not cracked, that look clean, and have not expired.
- ▶ Don't buy cans or jars that are dented, bulging, cracked, or have loose lids.
- ▶ Purchase produce that is not bruised or damaged.
- ▶ Choose frozen packages that are not open, torn, have crushed edges or are above the top of the store freezer compartment.
- ▶ Transport food home as quickly as possible, in a cooler or insulated bag if necessary.



## Avoid Cross-Contamination

- ▶ Keep meat, poultry, and seafood separate from other foods in your shopping basket.
- ▶ Make sure their juices do not drip onto other foods (especially those eaten raw, like fruits and vegetables) by placing these items in plastic bags provided at the meat counter or produce department.
- ▶ Make sure meat, poultry, and seafood are bagged separately from other foods at the checkout counter.

## Food Product Dating

Product dating is not required by federal regulations (except for infant formula). Therefore, there is not a standard dating system. However, common product dating used by manufacturers can provide basic information about foods.

Common food product dating codes:

- ▶ **sell by**  
Tells the store how long the product should be displayed for sale. You should not purchase the product after this date.
- ▶ **best if used by (or before)**  
Tells how long the product will retain its freshness, peak quality, and best flavor. This is not a food safety date.
- ▶ **use by**  
The last recommended date for using the product at peak quality. This date is determined by the manufacturer. Discard food when “use by” date has expired.
- ▶ **closed or coded**  
Manufacturer's packing codes for the products, which assist in tracking inventory, rotating stock, or locating the product if a problem arises. These dates are not an indication of product freshness or quality.

