

# Food safety myths busted

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From salmonella-contaminated grape tomatoes to smoked salmon laced with *Listeria*, pathogens in the food stream always make headlines. Rightly so, considering the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that each year one out of six Americans gets sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die due to food-borne diseases.

Nearly three-quarters of consumers are more concerned about food safety vs. five years ago, according to a Deloitte 2011 Consumer Food and Product Insights Survey. This represents a jump of eight percentage points since the same survey was conducted in 2011.

Food safety is even a national topic; President Barack Obama recently signed into law the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Safety Modernization Act, which aims to keep our food supply safe by shifting the focus of federal regulators from responding to contamination to preventing it.

Escalating concerns over food safety have given rise to myths and confusion over how you can best protect yourself from foodborne illness in your home. According to Jamie Stamey, M.S., R.D., a food safety consultant who spoke about food safety myths at a January, 2011 Food and Culinary Professionals Dietetic Practice Group presentation, "Myths may have just enough science or good sense to be believable. They frequently travel quickly through informal media."

You can protect yourself against foodborne illness by getting accurate information. Our food safety expert cuts through the hype on some of today's most widespread food safety myths:

1. Myth: When using bleach to sanitize my kitchen countertops, the more I use, the more bacteria I kill.

Mythbuster: According to the FDA Food Code, a solution of one tablespoon of bleach per one gallon of water is suitable for killing harmful bacteria that may linger on kitchen countertops. There are no advantages to using more bleach.

2. Myth: Lemon juice and salt will clean and sanitize a cutting board.

Mythbuster: "Lemon juice and salt will not reliably sanitize a surface," says Stamey. She suggests washing cutting boards with hot water and soap; and then sanitizing them with a chlorine bleach solution of one tablespoon per gallon of water (or 1 teaspoon per quart.)

3. Myth: I don't need to wash my produce if I'm going to peel it.

Mythbuster: Harmful bacteria could be on the outside of the produce, so if you peel or cut it without first washing it, the bacteria could be transferred via the knife or cutting board to the part that you eat. "Wash fresh fruits and vegetables under running tap water just before eating, cutting or cooking," Stamey suggests. "Never use detergent or bleach; these products are not intended for consumption. Packaged fruits and vegetables labeled 'ready-to-eat,' 'washed,' or 'triple washed' need not be washed, if they are used straight from the package."

4. Myth: You shouldn't put hot food in the refrigerator.

Mythbuster: "Bacteria grow rapidly in the 'danger zone' between 40 degrees F and 140 degrees F. Holding food at room temperature keeps it in the danger zone longer," explains Stamey, who suggests that you follow the "two hour" rule: Put food in the refrigerator as soon after cooking as possible — at least within two hours of cooking. In addition, dividing a large pot of food such as soup or stew into small, shallow containers helps it cool more quickly. And remember to keep your refrigerator at 40 degrees F or below.

5. Myth: Once a hamburger turns brown in the middle, it's cooked.

Mythbuster: "Visual cues are inaccurate guidelines in determining whether hamburger is cooked to a safe internal temperature," says Stamey. The only way to know that hamburger has been cooked to a safe internal temperature is to use a food thermometer; ground beef should be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 160 degrees F.

6. Myth: If I put raw chicken in a colander and rinse it with water, it will remove bacteria like salmonella.

Mythbuster: "There's no way to rinse away all bacteria on poultry," says Stamey. In fact, rinsing raw poultry is not a recommended safety step and can cause cross-contamination of bacteria to other foods and surfaces. Bacteria in poultry are inactivated when the poultry is cooked to a safe internal temperature of 165 degrees F.

7. Myth: Leftovers are safe to eat until they smell bad.

Mythbuster: The types of bacteria, parasites and viruses that cause illness do not affect the taste, smell, or appearance of food, stresses Stamey. The FDA recommends that you freeze or discard refrigerated leftovers within 3-4 days, or immediately if you're unsure how long they've been sitting in the refrigerator.

8. Myth: The "stand time" recommended on the package for cooking microwaveable foods is optional. (For example, package directions may read, "Cook in microwave for five minutes, let stand for two minutes.") It's just so you don't burn yourself.

Mythbuster: According to the FDA Food Code, the stand time is required as part of the cooking time because it allows heat to be conducted throughout the product. Using a thermometer is recommended to make sure that food has reached a safe internal temperature.

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