An Introduction to Food Safety

Take a bite-sized look at the processes that keep food safe to eat



What is food safety?

Food safety involves a range of processes to keep food safe to eat. This includes farm and animal care, production, labeling, packaging, storage, distribution, and communication about foodborne illness.

Foodborne illness refers to **all** illnesses caused by consuming contaminated food or beverages. Depending on the type of contaminant, you may develop symptoms, from mild to serious, within a few minutes or up to a few weeks later.

Although the terms are often used interchangeably, food poisoning is a *type* of foodborne illness caused by consuming specific toxins. Symptoms of food poisoning—nausea, headache, tingling in the extremities, or dizziness—typically appear within 60 minutes after eating.

Why do we need food safety guidelines?

Choices about food are individual, but what you consume should be safe to eat. For food grown or purchased outside of your home, safety guidelines and regulations prevent allergic reactions, illness, or death. These processes help provide quality control in communities across the country, so you can trust the food you purchase will be safe to eat.

Who helps keep food safe?

Several agencies contribute to national food safety. Because these efforts are coordinated at the local, state, and federal levels, the effectiveness of food safety monitoring in the United States depends on the funding and staffing available

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

FDA protects public health by regulating food and medicine in the United States. This includes regulating the safety of food (except meat, poultry, and egg products that are regulated by FSIS), cosmetics, devices that emit radiation, and tobacco products. This also includes regulating human and veterinary medicines, biologics, and medical devices.

U.S. Department of Agriculture: Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS)

FSIS is a public health agency within the Department of Agriculture. FSIS is responsible for ensuring that meat, poultry, and egg products are safe to eat, and properly labeled and packaged before commercial sale.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

The CDC leads federal efforts to prevent foodborne illness outbreaks—when two or more people get sick from consuming the same contaminated food or beverage. This includes collaborating with state and local public health departments on data gathering, investigation, monitoring, and outbreak response.

Food safety in action

Food safety is coordinated across the state, local, and federal levels. These regulations and guidelines are important to follow at every step of the "food chain"—from production to distribution to consumption.

The Food Safety Food Chain: Got Milk?

Milk is a good source of calcium *and* a good example of coordinated efforts to keep food safe. Consider the steps and safety considerations required to go from farm to table:

- Veterinary care to keep dairy cows healthy
- Pasteurization to remove harmful bacteria and viruses
- Bottling and labeling to provide nutrition facts
- Refrigerated transportation and storage to prevent spoiling

Together, these steps keep milk safe to drink. Removing any one of the steps poses a serious health risk. For example, skipping the pasteurization process—also known as producing "raw milk"—can expose people to harmful germs like *E. coli*, *Listeria*, and *Salmonella*. The food safety process of pasteurization has greatly reduced milk-borne illnesses over the past century.

Public Health Communications: Recalls and Outbreaks

A food recall occurs when a producer takes an unsafe product off the market, either voluntarily as a precaution or as ordered by a safety regulator. Recalls are used to prevent an outbreak of foodborne illness or contain the spread of an outbreak.

Public health departments at the state and local levels help share information about recalls and outbreaks. They can also issue public health alerts, often when a recall has not yet taken place. For example, if people are getting sick but the source of illness has not been identified, public health communicators may share information about safe food handling or storage to help mitigate risk.

For information on current recalls or outbreaks, visit:

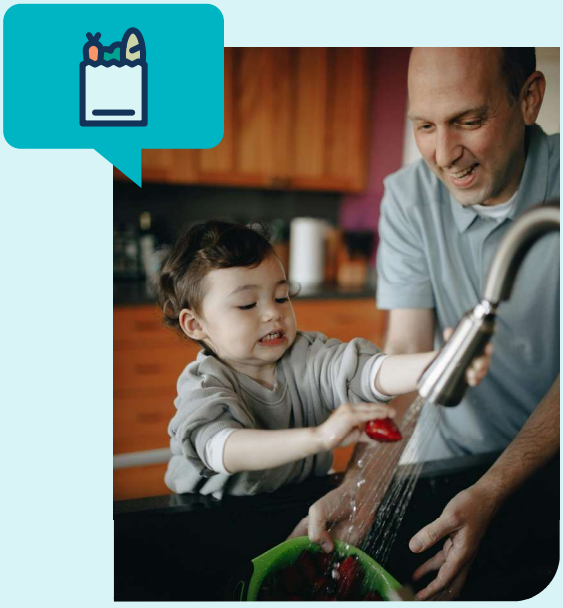
- CDC Foodborne Outbreaks
- FDA Recalls, Outbreaks & Emergencies
- USDA Recalls and Alerts
- Your state or local health department website

What you can do

Even with all of these processes in place, **you** play a critical role in keeping food safe to eat. Remember to always:

- **Clean** your hands, surfaces, cookware, utensils, and ingredients
- **Separate** raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs from other foods
- **Cook** food to an internal temperature that kills germs
- **Chill** perishable food promptly in the refrigerator or freezer

Learn more about these steps to prevent foodborne illness or how to report a problem with food.



For more information about food safety, visit foodsafety.gov

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