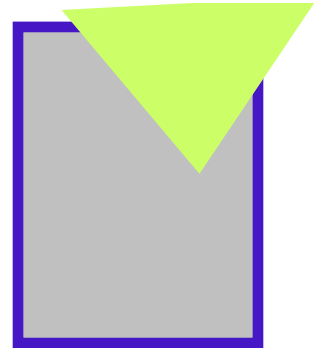


Briefing.

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Advice for College Students: How to avoid food poisoning

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College Dorms & Food Safety

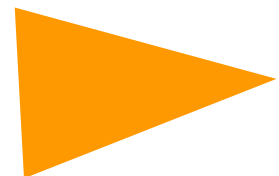
The **Simmons Center for Hygiene & Health** has some tips to help keep students safe from food poisoning. According to the CDC, 76 million Americans suffer from **food poisoning** every year as a result of ingesting contaminated food or drink. Most people recover within a few days, but for some the illness may last for weeks or months.

Common symptoms:

- Diarrhea & vomiting
- Nausea
- Headache
- Fever
- Stomach cramps
- Dizziness

People who suffer from a combination of these symptoms often complain of having “stomach flu” but what they are likely experiencing is an attack of food poisoning.

An increasing number of students are buying fridges and microwaves for their dorm rooms and with the added convenience of being able to store and prepare foods, there is also the potential for students to make themselves sick. If dorm fridges are used just as soft drinks coolers, there is little hazard, but as in any other setting where food is prepared, students need to follow some basic food safety rules.



Refrigerator Guidelines

Refrigerators should be run at 40 F or lower. The only way to be sure about the temperature is to keep a refrigerator thermometer near the front of the fridge.

Keep the fridge door shut to prevent the fridge temperature rising because it takes many hours to cool down again.

It is important to keep the fridge clean and to keep foods covered since many bacteria and molds are able to grow at refrigerator temperatures. All food of animal origin – meats, fish and dairy foods must be refrigerated and used quickly.

Leftovers from doggie bags and take-outs should be refrigerated as soon as possible and consumed within 24 hours. Canned and bottled foods should be refrigerated once opened.

Reject any foods that show signs of spoilage such as discoloration, presence of mold, bad odors and fermentation (gas bubbles and yeasty smell).

Do not leave opened foods around the dorm or in the dorm trash – this will attract pests such as cockroaches & rats

Microwave Guidelines

In microwave cooking, heat is generated by the microwave vibrating the food molecules. The food cooks itself and continues cooking even when the power is off. Microwave ovens have hot and cold spots that can cause uneven heating and if there is no built-in turntable, the food has to be manually turned or stirred to ensure that it is heated evenly throughout.

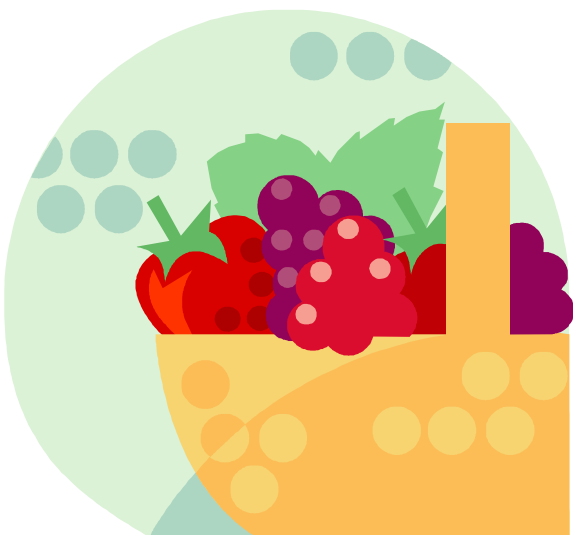
Cooked foods should be allowed to stand for 2 minutes after cooking so that all parts of the food reach the right temperature.

For refrigerated entrees in sealed packaging, always follow instructions and timing on the package.

Keep the microwave oven clean.

Fridge and Microwave Tips

- Fridges should run at 40F or less – check using a fridge thermometer.
- Keep the fridge and microwave clean –use an antibacterial kitchen product and paper towels.
- Keep foods covered in the refrigerator.
- Leftovers should be refrigerated within 2 hours from when they were cooked and then consumed within 24 hours.
- Store foods such as jellies, pickles and mayo in the fridge, once opened.
- Carefully follow microwave cooking instructions for refrigerated entrees in sealed packaging.
- Never reheat a food more than once.
- If in doubt about whether or not a food is still safe to eat after storing, throw it out.
- Do not leave opened foods around the room or in the room trash barrel.



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More Advice For Students

Be careful about the kinds of food you buy from street vendors and food courts because they often operate on the outer margins of food safety. It is best to buy only simple hot items that are cooked right in front of your eyes – something that you can eat immediately. Watch to make sure that the vendor does not touch the food with his or her hands after it's cooked.

Salad bars contain many high-risk foods such as ready-to-eat potato and pasta salads. Check to make sure that the salad bar is being operated safely. Food should not be piled high above the container where it cannot be kept cold, there should always be a sneeze-guard in place and there should be long-handled serving spoons so that customers do not touch the food with their hands.

Make safe food choices. Young adults are the group most likely to make risky eating choices, choosing to eat undercooked foods of animal origin such as hamburgers and sushi etc.

Anyone, even healthy young adults with strong immune systems, may suffer a bout of food poisoning.

If you do suffer from symptoms of food poisoning this is what you should do:

- For mild symptoms, rest and drink plenty of fluids
- For more severe symptoms that continue for more than a few hours, seek advice from Student Health Services or in an emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency room

And remember, it is very easy to pass on the germs that cause food poisoning directly from one person to another via the fecal-oral route and via contact with diarrhea or vomit. That is why when a person has food poisoning symptoms, hand washing and personal hygiene practices become even more important, especially when people are living together in dorms.

References:

How to prevent food poisoning. A practical guide to safe cooking, eating and food handling. Scott & Sockett. 1998. Wiley.