

Food safety when eating outdoors or barbecuing

In Australia we enjoy our outdoor lifestyle. Eating outdoors is a great way to make the best of our lovely climate. Whether it's a barbecue, picnic or camping trip, the food seems to taste better when you eat it outdoors. But there can also be some risks - and no, they are not just mosquitoes or ants. Food poisoning can also be a real risk when eating outdoors, especially in the warmer months. You need to take a little more care when preparing and storing foods for outdoor eating.

Why is eating outdoors any different?

Whether you go on a picnic, BBQ or camping trip, there are some things which can increase the risk of food poisoning.

- Your food will be taken out of its regular environment, which is in the fridge, freezer or pantry for longer periods of time than usual.
- You rely on a cooler (such as an Esky) to keep your food cold. It is hard to cool food evenly in a cooler. This may increase the risk food will remain in the temperature danger zone (5°C-60°C) for long times and bacteria may grow.
- Many foods for outdoor eating such as salads, rice dishes, quiche and cold cooked chicken, are pre-prepared. These foods need to be protected from cross contamination from any raw meats and stored as close to 5°C as possible because they will be consumed without reheating.
- Often hand washing facilities are not available or are inadequate with no hot water or soap available.
- Safe drinking water may not be available.
- Usually picnic tables and BBQ preparation areas are small and not too clean. These factors increase the risk of contamination and cross-contamination during food preparation. Avoid direct food contact with the surface - use a clean plate or tray.
- Wash your hands, chopping boards and knives before you start preparation, and between preparing raw and ready to eat foods.
- People are in a hurry to eat so there may be a temptation to not cook sausages, hamburger or chicken right through.

INFORMATION

Barbeques at home

- Keep meat in the fridge until you are ready to put it on the BBQ.
- Keep all ready to eat food covered until you are ready to eat it. This will protect it from contamination by flies, etc.
- Always cook chicken, stuffed meats, sausages and minced meat such as hamburger so that the juices run clear - there should be no hint of pink in the centre. Steaks, chops and whole pieces of meat can be cooked to preference.
- Use a clean plate and clean utensils for cooked meat. Never re-use the same ones you used for the raw meat without washing them.
- Keep salads, pates, cheese, dips and other perishable products in the fridge or cooler until needed. It's a good idea to divide nibbles into smaller serves and replace them during the day to reduce the amount of bacteria that can grow. Don't mix fresh top-ups with food that have been outside for some time. Low risk foods, e.g. nuts, crisps, crackers, etc. can be topped up.
- Put perishables into the fridge immediately after that part of the meal is finished. Do not let food cool on the bench. As soon as steam has stopped rising, refrigerate or freeze in a leak-proof container. Make sure the fridge is still operating at or below 5°C even after the extra food has been placed inside.

Picnics and barbeques away from home

Remember the simple rule for food safety; keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. This is even more difficult when preparing food for a picnic or outing.

- Put meat into a cooler when travelling. Meat juices can easily leak onto pre-prepared foods, so package with this in mind. Just in case, place the meat on the bottom of the cooler away from ready-to-eat food
- Cut meat into serving-size pieces before leaving home and have all salads ready to eat. This will reduce the need to handle foods, particularly when there are no hand-washing facilities.
- Don't pack food for a picnic if it has just been cooked and is still warm. Coolers cannot cool food enough to prevent bacteria growing. You can hasten the cooling process of hot food by pre-cooling it in a shallow container.
- Always cover pre-prepared foods securely and keep in the refrigerator overnight. Other perishable foods, such as deli products, cooked chicken and dairy products must also be at or below 5°C when put in the cooler.
- Always pack plenty of ice blocks, frozen bricks or gel packs around the food. Frozen drinks thaw quickly in warm weather and serve as extra cool bricks. If staying at a caravan park, ask if you can refreeze some of your bricks overnight or replenish the ice.
- Wicker baskets, unless they are insulated, are best used for non-perishables and your other picnic needs.
- Avoid keeping perishables such as salads, quiches and cold meats out of the fridge for longer than four hours. If you expect to take leftovers home, they should be left out for no longer than two hours. Transport the left overs home in the cooler with iceblocks and put it in the fridge as soon as you get home.

- It's OK to leave cooked meat to remain warm on a corner of the BBQ or covered on a plate for late arrivals. Just ensure it is protected from flies and, as with cold perishables, avoid leaving it around for more than four hours, (or two hours if there are leftovers to be put into the fridge).
- Carry disposable wipes in case there is no water for hand washing, and dispose of your rubbish properly. If there are no bins, take your rubbish home with you.

Tips for camping

- Perishable foods are unsuitable for camping unless you have access to a refrigerator. It is best to use dry, UHT and canned products. Pack all these products in leak-proof containers.
- When you have chosen your site, get your cooler out of the car into the shade as soon as possible. You will need to keep moving it as the sun moves.
- Never save leftovers. Cook only enough for your meal and discard the rest.
- Raw and cooked meats and precooked casseroles can be frozen and kept in a cooler for 24 hours provided they are cooked or reheated properly.
- Keep eating and drinking utensils clean. Use clean warm water and detergent, dry thoroughly using a clean tea-towel and store in a covered box. If warm water is not available, use clean boiled or disinfected water.
- Keep utensils used for preparing raw foods away from ready-to-eat foods. Wash in between - remember to wash your hands too.
- Unless you are sure the water at the camp site has been treated, always boil your drinking water or use disinfecting tablets. No matter how pristine and isolated your camping site looks, there is a risk of bacteria and parasites in the water.
- Washing hands after going to the toilet is just as important when you are camping as it is when you are at home. Use disposable wipes if necessary.
- Keep the campsite as clean as possible. Birds and animals can be a source of food poisoning bacteria so do not leave food and utensils lying about.

For safety's sake, remember the 7 key tips

- Keep hot food steaming hot.
- Keep cold food refrigerated.
- Cook food properly.
- Separate raw and cooked foods.
- Keep kitchen and utensils clean.
- Wash hands with soap and dry thoroughly.

Need more information?

For more information, please go to www.health.act.gov.au or phone the Health Protection Service during business hours on (02) 6205 1700.

Acknowledgement

This information is extracted from Food Safety Information Council – website: www.foodsafety.asn.au



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