

Chapter 9

FOOD SAFETY

What is a food-borne illness?

How can I help prevent food-borne illness?

How do I keep food safe in a power failure?





CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

Health Canada estimates that there are 11 to 13 million cases of food-borne illness in Canada every year.

You may get a food-borne illness without even realizing it. You may think you have a stomach bug or a touch of flu, nothing terribly important. But food-borne illness can be very serious, even deadly, especially for seniors.

Everyone is different, but if you are like most people, your immune system will grow weaker with age and you will not be as good at fighting illnesses as you used to be. You may have less stomach acid, which helps to keep the bacteria in your intestines under control. You may also already have a chronic illness, such as diabetes, cancer or kidney disease, which makes you even more vulnerable to spoiled food.

What is a food-borne illness?

A food-borne illness occurs when a person eats food infected with tiny disease-causing organisms, such as bacteria, viruses and parasites.

The most common symptoms of a food-borne illness are stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches and/or fever. These symptoms usually occur within a few hours after eating contaminated food and usually last only a day or two. But in some cases, symptoms may take several days to appear and may last as long as a week to 10 days.

Meat, chicken and turkey, seafood, eggs, vegetables and fruit, milk and milk products may all carry the germs responsible for food-borne illnesses. When you handle these foods, you may also transfer the germs to other foods, as well as to your kitchen counters, cutting boards or utensils.



CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

How can I prevent food-borne illness?

As you age, your immune system weakens, which means you should avoid foods that carry a higher risk of contamination.

These include:

- unpasteurized cheeses (feta, Brie and Camembert)
- raw or unpasteurized cow or goat milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk
- raw fish
- raw shellfish (oysters, clams, mussels and scallops)
- raw or under-cooked meat, chicken or turkey
- raw sprouts
- unpasteurized or freshly pressed fruit juice or cider, usually sold at roadside stands or juice bars, and
- raw or lightly cooked eggs, including uncooked cake or cookie batter (no licking the spoon!), salad dressings and sauces made with eggs.

At the grocery store:

Pick up all foods that must be refrigerated or frozen last, just before you go to the checkout counter.

Keep raw meat, seafood and poultry well wrapped and away from other items in your grocery cart (they can drip onto other foods). Ask the checkout clerk to put them in a separate bag.

Read the “best before” dates on food items and make sure you will have enough time to eat what you buy. For example, do not buy a big container of yogurt that expires in two days, if you don’t think you will be able to eat it all in that time. And remember: throw out all food items after they expire, even canned and packaged food.

As soon as you get home

Refrigerate or freeze:

- perishable foods (foods with a limited shelf life, such as milk and other dairy products, vegetables, meat and poultry)
- prepared foods that say “keep refrigerated” or “keep frozen” on the package, and
- restaurant leftovers.

Place raw meat, seafood and poultry in a drawer or container on the bottom shelf of your refrigerator so they won't they drip onto other foods.

Before handling food

Wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and warm water. Regular soap is fine; you do not have to use an anti-bacterial soap. Dry your hands with a clean hand towel or paper towel.

After handling food

Wash everything – your hands, your cutting board, bowls, utensils and counter tops – with soap and warm water before you go on to the next food. This will prevent the transfer of germs from one food to another. For example, once you cut the skin off the raw chicken, wash everything before you chop the broccoli.

Food safety tips

- Keep two cutting boards (wood or plastic). Use one for raw meat, poultry and seafood and the other for washed vegetables and fruit and other ready-to-eat food, such as cheese. Mark each one so that you know which board is for which purpose.
- Replace your cutting boards as soon as they become worn or develop hard-to-clean grooves.
- Sanitize your wooden cutting boards every time you cut raw meat or at least once a week with a bleach solution. Use one tsp (5 mL) of household bleach to three cups (750 mL) of water. Flood your board with the mixture. Let it stand a few minutes, then rinse thoroughly with clean water.
- Use the hot cycle to wash your dishcloths. Wash them often. Consider using paper towels to clean up kitchen surfaces.
- It is not always possible to tell when food is no longer safe: it may not look, smell or taste bad. When in doubt, throw it out.



CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

If you are using a marinade on meat or vegetables for extra flavour, marinate the food in the refrigerator, not on the counter at room temperature.

Before cooking or serving vegetables and fruit

Wash all vegetables and fruit under clean running water (the water must be safe enough to drink), even those with a hard rind that you do not eat, like oranges, melons and squash. You may transfer bacteria from the outer skin to the inner flesh when you cut or peel them.

Do not use detergent or bleach to wash fruit and vegetables. These cleaners can be absorbed into your food. Clean running water is enough.

In addition:

- Use a vegetable scrub brush on vegetables and fruit that have a firm skin, such as carrots, potatoes, melons and squash.
- Throw away the outer leaves of leafy vegetables before you wash the rest. Make sure all dirt is gone.

Storing uneaten or unused food

At room temperature, bacteria in food can double every 20 minutes. Refrigerate or freeze all perishable or leftover food within two hours.

Never put very hot food, such as soup, stew or pasta sauce, directly from the stove into the refrigerator. Instead, let your dish cool at room temperature for about 30 minutes and then transfer it to a shallow, covered container and place it in the refrigerator. (Use several shallow containers, if necessary – they cool more quickly than deep containers.) Today's refrigerators

Watch out!

The danger zone for germs is between 40°F (4°C) and 140°F (60°C):

- Hot food should be hotter than 140°F (60°C).
- Cold food should be colder than 40°F (4°C).

can handle warm food better than older ones – so don't be afraid of putting dishes that are still a bit warm into your fridge!

Throw out any perishable or leftover food that has been sitting at room temperature for longer than two hours. If your hard cheese becomes mouldy on the outside, carefully cut off the mould and 1 inch (2.5 cm) away from the mould. Cutting off just the mould is not enough! And, use the cheese as soon as possible.

Set your refrigerator at 40°F (4°C) or colder and your freezer at 0°F (-18°C). Use an appliance thermometer, available at any grocery or hardware store, to make sure your refrigerator and freezer are cold enough.

Store eggs in their original carton, even if you have an egg tray in your refrigerator. Trays, especially in the door, are often not cold enough.

Leave some room for cold air to circulate: don't pack your refrigerator too tightly with food.

Thawing food from the freezer

Do not thaw frozen food on the counter, at room temperature. The outside can thaw first, while the inside remains frozen, creating a breeding ground for bacteria. Frozen foods should be thawed either:

Watch out!

Do not put plastic containers, such as margarine tubs, in the microwave. As the container heats, some unhealthy chemicals can transfer into your food. Use containers labeled "microwave safe" only.



CHAPTER 9 FOOD SAFETY

- In the refrigerator. It will usually take about five hours to thaw one pound (500 grams) of meat or poultry.
- In a microwave. Follow your microwave's directions for thawing food and cook the food immediately after you have thawed it. Never microwave plastic wrap or foam containers.
- Under cold water. Keep the food in its original wrapping or container and change the water every half hour to make sure it stays cold.

Dealing with leftovers

Have you ever pulled out a container from your fridge or freezer and wondered what on earth's inside? Put a label on the containers you put leftovers in, with both the date and the name of the dish.

Eat refrigerated leftovers as soon as possible, preferably within three days.

Reheat leftovers once only. Throw out what's left.

Cooking food

Heat food thoroughly to at least 140°F (60°C). Leftovers should be heated to an even higher temperature, at least 165°F (74°C).

Use a food thermometer – available at any grocery or hardware store – to make sure your cooked food really is cooked. A digital thermometer is easiest to read.

If you are using a microwave, first cover the dish then stir and rotate it at least once during cooking to make sure there are no cold spots where germs can survive.

How do I keep food safe during a power failure?

Two hours is the safety margin. If your power is out for less than two hours, the food in your refrigerator or freezer will be fine, provided your refrigerator and freezer are set properly. Make sure your refrigerator is set at 40°F (4°C) or colder and your freezer at 0°F (-18°C). Appliance thermometers are available at all grocery and hardware stores.

Food in a full chest or upright freezer will last even longer, about 24 hours for a half-full freezer and 48 hours for a full freezer.

Once the power goes out, open your fridge and freezer doors as seldom as possible. If the power stays out more than two hours or the temperature in your fridge is higher than 40°F (4°C), throw out all perishable food, such as meat, fish, poultry, milk, eggs and leftovers. If you are in the middle of cooking at the time of the power failure, throw out all the partially cooked food.

Healthy Eating

QUIZ # 8

short answer

1. How many cutting boards should you have?

TWO: one for raw meat, poultry and seafood, and the other for everything else.

2. How long should you wash your hands in warm soapy water before and after handling food?

20 SECONDS.

3. Do you need to use detergent or bleach to clean fresh vegetables and fruit?

NO. Plain water is all you need.

4. How soon should you put leftovers in the refrigerator or freezer?

WITHIN TWO HOURS. After more than two hours, throw it out!

Chapter 10

INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST

How do I know I'm getting reliable information?

Where can I find reliable information?

What's the difference between a dietitian and a nutritionist?





CHAPTER 10 INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST

You see them everywhere: ads for this miracle diet – “You can lose 10 pounds in 10 days!” – or that complete cure – “No more arthritis pain, ever!” But how do you know these products will really work? Whose advice should you take?

On questions of health or physical activity, always see your doctor first. On questions of nutrition and healthy eating, talk to a dietitian – see the back cover for contact information.

For tried, tested and true advice on healthy eating and creating a healthy lifestyle, you can also rely on Canada’s Food Guide (Appendix B) and the organizations listed in this chapter.

How do I know I am getting reliable information?

Unproven remedies give people false hope and may even be dangerous, either because they keep you from getting proper medical attention or because their ingredients are harmful. They can also cost a lot of money.

You know you are getting good information if it comes from a reliable source. Here are some basic truths that can help you judge whether or not information is reliable:

- Aging is a fact of life. There is no cure for it and no treatment will slow it down. Healthy eating, staying active and not smoking are the only things experts know for sure can help prevent the diseases that happen more often with age.
- There is no proven way to prevent all types of cancer. There are, however, treatments that can help once you get cancer, but you have to start them as soon as possible.



CHAPTER 10 INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST

- Drinking a particular type of juice, eating a low-protein diet or embarking on treatments that claim to “cure” cancer may be harmful, especially if you delay starting on treatments that are proven to work.
- There is no cure for most types of arthritis. However, arthritis symptoms can come and go, so it is easy to be tricked into thinking that a special diet, pill or oil has made it disappear. Talk to your doctor about what is proven to work.
- Losing weight takes work and it takes time. It is not safe to lose more than about half a pound a week, and it will be harder to keep the weight off if you lose it too quickly without also making changes in your lifestyle, such as adding regular physical activity. It’s also not safe to follow a low-carbohydrate or a liquid diet for any length of time.
- “Natural” does not automatically mean safer. Some plants can be harmful and even deadly, especially if you are already taking medication for a condition such as heart disease.

Always question what you see on TV, read in an ad or hear from a friend. Depend on the sources that you know are objective and have nothing to gain from whether you buy a product or not, including your doctor, a registered dietitian, Health Canada, or a non-profit foundation.

Watch out for personal testimonials, such as “this oil cured my husband’s Alzheimer’s disease” or “I was diabetic, but taking this pill cured me in five days.” They are usually not scientifically proven, and may be made up.

Remember, too, that just about anybody can set up a website. Look for websites from reputable sources.

Check it out

Before you try a health-related product, talk to your doctor, dietitian or pharmacist for a medical opinion or contact Health Canada’s Natural Health Products Directorate at 1 888 774-5555.

Where can I find reliable information?

All health issues

The BC Health Guide Program provides reliable health information and advice you can trust. The program includes:

- The BC HealthGuide handbook provides information on how to recognize and cope with common health concerns, including tips on home treatment, care options and when to see a health professional. You can find topics relevant to older adults throughout this book, including information on healthy aging and tips for caregivers. Sections of particular interest to seniors are marked with an icon. To get a free copy of the BC HealthGuide handbook, visit your local pharmacy or Government Agents Office or call BC NurseLine.
- BC HealthGuide OnLine links you to a world of medically approved, up-to-date health information as well as more information on the BC HealthGuide Program. Visit www.bchealthguide.org.
- BC HealthFiles are fact sheets with BC-specific information on a wide range of public and environmental health and safety issues. Copies are available at www.bchealthguide.org or at public health units. Some BC HealthFiles have been translated into other languages including Chinese, Punjabi and French.
- BC NurseLine provides confidential health information and advice. You can speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and a pharmacist from 5 p.m. to 9 a.m. every day. Translation services are available in 130 languages.

In Greater Vancouver, call 604 215-4700.

Elsewhere in B.C., call toll-free 1 866 215-4700.

Deaf and hearing-impaired, call toll-free 1 866 889-4700.



CHAPTER 10 INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST

- Dial-A-Dietitian specializes in easy-to-use nutrition information for self-care, based on current scientific sources. Registered dietitians can provide brief nutrition consultation by phone. If you need more in-depth counseling, they will guide you to hospital outpatient dietitians, community nutritionists or other nutrition services in your community. This service does not replace the medical counsel of your doctor. Translation services are available in 130 languages.

In Greater Vancouver, call 604 732-9191.

Elsewhere in B.C., call toll-free 1 800 667-3438.

Or visit www.dialadietitian.org.

For information about health and other government services for British Columbia seniors:

- The Health and Seniors' Information Line is available Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Agents can answer your questions about services for seniors, and help you access government programs.

In Greater Victoria, call 250 952-1742.

Elsewhere in B.C., call toll-free 1 800 465-4911.

In addition:

- The Alzheimer Society of B.C. can answer your questions about Alzheimer's disease. Call 1 800 667-3742 or visit www.alzheimerbc.org.
- For information about arthritis, call the Arthritis Society of Canada's Arthritis Answer Line at 1 800 321-1433 or visit www.arthritis.ca/bc.
- For information about preventing or living with cancer, call the Canadian Cancer Society at 1 888 939-3333 or visit www.cancer.ca.
- For help with alcohol or drug use, try the Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Services at 604 660-9382 in the Lower Mainland. Elsewhere in B.C. call 1 800 663-1441.

- If you're ready to quit smoking, call QuitNow at 1 877 455-2233 or visit www.quitnow.ca.
- Living a Healthy Life With Chronic Conditions is a free six-week course offered in a variety of locations throughout British Columbia. Call 1 866 902-3767 or visit www.coag.uvic.ca/cdsmp and click on your area of the province for the course nearest you.

Healthy eating

Canada's Food Guide is a great source of information on healthy eating (see Appendix B). You might also want to try Dial-A-Dietitian (see previous page). In addition:

- Dietitians of Canada offers reliable advice and terrific recipes. Visit www.dietitians.ca.
- The Canadian Cancer Society publishes an easy-to-read booklet called Good Nutrition: A guide for people with cancer. They also publish Eat Well, Be Active, a guide to preventing cancer through healthy eating and exercise, along with a variety of other publications. Call 1 888 939-3333 or visit www.cancer.ca.
- The Canadian Diabetes Association has lots of good information on nutrition and diabetes. Call 1 800 226-8464 or visit www.diabetes.ca. Many communities also have excellent local diabetes education programs. Ask your doctor for a referral.
- The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada can help with any questions about nutrition and its connection to heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. They also have some great recipes for easy, tasty and nutritious dishes. Call 1 888 473-4636 or visit www.heartandstroke.ca.
- The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada also operates Health Check™, the national not-for-profit food information program. Health Check provides consumers with a quick visual reference (a logo) on restaurant menus and food packaging. The logo guarantees the food has met specific nutrition criteria based on Canada's Food Guide. Visit www.healthcheck.org.



HEART &
STROKE
FOUNDATION
FONDATION
DES MALADIES
DU CŒUR



CHAPTER 10 INFORMATION YOU CAN TRUST

- The Osteoporosis Society of Canada has a number of easy-to-use resources that will help you figure out how much calcium you are receiving from your current diet. Call 1 800 363-1933 or go to www.osteoporosis.ca.
- The B.C. Aboriginal Network on Disability Society publishes guides to healthy eating with traditional Aboriginal foods. To order, call 1 888 815-5511 or visit www.bcands.bc.ca.
- Health Canada's website (click on Food & Nutrition in the left-hand navigation bar) offers information on such topics as food safety, food labeling and genetically modified foods. Visit www.hc-sc.gc.ca.
- The Food Safety Information Society provides information about storing food safely, including the shelf-life of virtually any food.

Exercise

Before starting any physical activity program, consult your doctor. If your doctor says you are ready, contact an exercise professional/registered kinesiologist for advice about what physical activity, and how much physical activity, is best for you.

To find an exercise professional near you, contact:

- the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology at 1 877 651-3755 or visit www.csep.ca
- B.C. Recreation and Parks Association at 1 866 929-0965 or visit www.bcrpa.bc.ca, or
- B.C. Association of Kinesiologists at 1 604 601-5100 or visit www.bcak.bc.ca.

Also read the Public Health Agency of Canada's free guide, *Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living for Older Adults*. To order your copy, call 1 888 334-9769 or visit www.paguide.com.

What's the difference between a dietitian and a nutritionist?

The titles “registered dietitian,” “professional dietitian” and “dietitian” are protected by law in all Canadian provinces. Only people who have met national standards for education and training can use these titles. A dietitian will have at least a bachelor's degree (and many will have a master's or a doctorate) with a specialty in foods and nutrition. All dietitians in British Columbia are registered with the College of Dietitians of BC and listed in the college's public registry at www.collegeofdietitiansbc.org.

The title “nutritionist” is not protected by law in all provinces, which means anybody could use the title even if they are not formally trained in foods and nutrition. However, many dietitians also call themselves nutritionists. Ask if your nutritionist is a registered dietitian.

A dietitian can:

- give you advice about what foods to eat to lower your risk of certain diseases or how to lose weight and keep it off
- help you plan meals for specific health problems, such as diabetes or high cholesterol, and
- assess whether you are eating correctly and whether you need to change the way you eat.

To find a dietitian:

- try Dial-A-Dietitian (see back cover)
- visit the Dietitians of Canada website at www.dietitians.ca
- ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian
- call your local public health department, or
- look in the Yellow Pages under dietitians.