

Food safety for severe immuno-deficient patients



Information for patients

Clinical Immunology and Allergy Unit

Food safety guidelines are especially important to follow when your immune system is weakened. Germs and toxins (which are poisons made by the germs) can be passed to you by food that has been incorrectly stored, handled and cooked.

Food poisoning symptoms include fever, tummy cramps and headaches as well as nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. You should seek medical attention if you suspect you have food poisoning.

The following recommendations may seem daunting, but bearing them in mind might save you a stay in hospital!

Shopping

- Buy food as fresh as possible.
- Check any 'best before dates'.
- Keep the food cool if you are not going straight home. Carry a cool box and use it for perishable items rather than putting food directly into a hot car.
- If you intend freezing any item such as meat or fish do so as soon as possible. Don't store it for a couple of days before freezing it.

Storage

- Your fridge should be between 2°C and 4°C, your freezer at or below minus 18°C.
- Raw meats and fish - avoid drips contaminating food that is ready to eat.
- Cook meat or fish within 2 days or freeze on day of purchase.
- Keep your fridge, hands and kitchen clean.

Preparation

- Make sure you **wash your hands** before preparing food.
- Use an anti-bacterial cleaner for surfaces and equipment.
- If any part of a piece of food has gone mouldy (except the normal appearance of blue cheese) throw out the entire piece - toxins can travel into the 'good' parts and poison them as well.

- Some of you may be specifically advised to avoid unpasteurised soft cheeses because of the risk of Listeria.
- Marinate food in the fridge and not at room temperature.
- Chopping boards are a particular danger as bugs can hide in scratches and cracks. Use plastic / glass / stainless steel boards and change them regularly.
- Keep a separate board for raw meat and fish and another for fruit and vegetables.
- Immediately after handling raw meat or fish **wash your hands** and any knives or chopping boards in **hot** water.
- Use a hand towel to dry your hands, not the tea towel.
- Wash fruit and salad vegetables before eating*.
- Keep pets away from food and work surfaces.

*Some of you may be advised to take specific measures to avoid cryptosporidial infection. If this is the case, you need to ensure that all water is appropriately treated.

Cooking

- Shellfish and steamed fish **must** be cooked for at least 7 minutes.
- Meat should be too hot to touch. If you enjoy roast meat it would be worth investing in a meat thermometer to make sure that the centre of a joint reaches between 70°C and 85°C.
- Cook eggs thoroughly; make sure both the white and the yolk are hard.
- Cook boiled or fried rice according to the instructions and eat it immediately. Do not re-heat.
- Barbecued food is a common source of food poisoning.
- Make sure everything is well cooked in the middle.
- Do **not** mix raw and cooked meats on the same plate or chopping board.

Left overs

- Allow food to cool, wrap well and store in the fridge. Plastic boxes with well-fitting lids are ideal for storage, or use foil or cling film.
- Do **not** store cooked rice to re-heat.
- Eat left-overs within 2 days.
- Re-heat the food thoroughly, it should be **at least** 70°C in the middle.
- Remember microwaved food is hotter at the edges so make sure you stir it.
- Do not re-heat cooked food more than once.

Foods to avoid

- Beware of shellfish unless it has been steamed for **at least** 7 minutes. (NB Most restaurants only cook shellfish for 2-3 minutes, this is not long enough to kill any germs they may contain.)
- Avoid Sushi dishes with raw fish.
- Do not eat dairy products containing **raw** ie **unpasteurised** milk. Check the label or **ask**.

- Be especially careful to check labels of soft ripened cheeses eg Brie and Camembert, also some cheeses made from goats' milk.
- Blue cheeses should be avoided in certain patient groups (eg CGD and severe combined deficiencies)
- NB all cheese is safe when well cooked.
- Meat pastes and pâtés are best avoided unless well cooked and freshly prepared.
- Avoid cold rice served in salad dishes.
- Keep clear of foods with raw or lightly cooked eggs such as home-made mayonnaise, Caesar salad dressing or Hollandaise sauce, tiramisu, 'luxury' ice creams and mousses.

If any of your favourite dishes are listed then consider alternatives, eg most mayonnaise purchased in jars will be made from pasteurised eggs / egg powder.

Eating out

- Avoid eating food prepared in grubby places!
- Ask for your meat, fish or poultry to be well cooked or medium-well done.
- When your food arrives check that is well cooked and hot. You are the customer!
- Make sure that all foods which are supposed to be cold are chilled and not at room temperature.
- Be careful about selecting food from salad bars. Check that the food is cool and fresh.
- Food containing lightly cooked eggs can be tricky. Ask if the restaurant uses pasteurised egg powder.

Enjoy your meal!



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