

Food Safety Tips

The holiday season often includes parties, pot lucks, and family gatherings that can result in food being leftover. Taking these leftovers home and serving again has long been a part of these festivities.



Just because food has been served once, does not mean that it cannot be safely served again. Leftovers can be very safe to eat and enjoy as long as certain common-sense practices are followed. The food safety specialists at the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries offer these tips to help you use leftovers safely.

To save or not to save:

- Perishable leftovers such as meats, fish, poultry, shellfish, dairy foods and cooked rice, pasta or vegetable dishes that normally require refrigeration, should not be left at room temperature for more than two hours.
- If leftovers from home or restaurants cannot be refrigerated or frozen within this two-hour limit, then they should be consumed during the meal or discarded.

How to Cool Leftovers:

- Refrigerate leftovers immediately. Cold food should be held at 4°C (40 °F) or colder.
- Very hot items can be cooled at room temperature for approximately 30 minutes prior to being refrigerated.
- Cooling can be hastened by deboning large pieces of meat or poultry and dividing into smaller portions. Use shallow containers and have food no more than two inches deep.
- Loosely cover the container until the food is cooled to 4°C (40 °F) or place uncovered on the top shelf of the refrigerator. Tightly cover the food when cooled.
- Leave an airspace around containers in the refrigerator to allow for the circulation of cold air around the food.

Storing Leftovers:

- Refrigerated leftovers should be eaten within four days or frozen to keep them longer. Dating leftovers helps to make sure they are not stored too long.
- Frozen leftovers should be used in two to four months for best quality. When taken out of the freezer leftovers should be used within four days.

Reheating Leftovers:

- Frozen leftovers should be thawed in the refrigerator, in the microwave oven or by heating using the stove.
- Leftovers must be reheated to at least 74 °C (165°F). The temperature should be checked using a thermometer.
- Soups, sauces and gravies should be reheated to a rolling boil.
- Reheat only what you require, as any reheated, uneaten leftovers should be discarded.

Reheating in a microwave:

- Use only containers designed for use in the microwave. They should be labelled for microwave use.
- Loosen cover or wrap on the container to allow steam to escape. Do not allow the plastic wrap to come in contact with the food.
- Stir or rotate food midway, or as needed, during the microwave time. Allow a few minutes standing time at the end of heating.

To ensure a happy and healthy holiday season and safe food handling all year, remember these four simple rules: cook foods to proper temperatures; chill foods properly in the refrigerator; when shopping or when storing leftovers, keep foods separate to avoid cross contamination; and keep your hands, utensils and work space clean and free of bacteria.

For further information on food safety visit the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture Food Safety website at <http://www.gov.ns.ca/agri/>