

# Health Tips

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with

Dr. D


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## Health Tip: Healthy Kitchens, Part 2

Last week, we looked at the problem of food-borne illness and learned a method for cleaning fruits and vegetables that assured practically 100% of pathogenic bacteria would be killed. For those who missed last week's tip, it may be helpful to review the Partnership for Food Safety Education's **core four practices of safe food handling**:

- **Clean:** Wash hands and food preparation surfaces often.
- **Separate:** Avoid cross-contamination. Raw meat, poultry and seafood should be kept away from ready-to-eat foods such as salads or raw vegetables.
- **Cook:** Cook to proper temperature. This is best determined by using a meat thermometer.
- **Chill:** Refrigerate promptly. Cold temperatures slow the growth of harmful bacteria.

This week we'll look at a few other measures for preventing food-borne illness.



**Cleaning Kitchen Sponges.** Sponges are an essential tool in almost every kitchen for cleaning counter tops and cooking surfaces. But what happens when sponges become contaminated with bacteria? You guessed it, the contaminants become spread across the kitchen, increasing the likelihood of contaminating food. Many people mistakenly assume that simply rinsing or even washing sponges in soapy water will remove contaminants. Even the use of bleach solutions, however, has been shown to leave disease-causing bacteria in used sponges. A group of scientists from the U.S. Agricultural Research Service ([ARS](#)) tested several

methods for reducing risks from harmful microbes hiding in reused sponges. The methods that they tested included soaking in chlorine (bleach) solutions, lemon juice, distilled water, heating in a microwave, and placing in a dishwasher (with the drying cycle activated). The most effective of these methods were

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microwaving and dishwashing the sponges. After heating in a microwave, 99.9% of bacteria were killed, roughly equivalent to running the sponge in the dishwasher with a drying cycle. This study was confirmed recently by researchers at the [University of Florida](#) who found that 2 minutes on high heat was the optimal time to microwave the sponges. It is important, however, that the sponges be very wet before being placed in the microwave, since instances of sponges catching fire have occurred. When I tried this method, I felt more comfortable stopping the microwave every 30 seconds and monitoring the progress of the sponge being disinfected. Either of these simple and convenient treatments can help ensure that contaminated sponges don't spread food-borne pathogens around household kitchens.

**Cooking meats thoroughly.** Quick, answer these questions regarding cooking meats: Do all meats need to be cooked to the same temperature? Is color a reliable indicator of doneness? Are meat thermometers only needed by gourmet cooks?

In order to kill bacteria-contaminated meat, cuts such as roasts and steaks need to be heated to 145 degrees F, but ground beef needs to be heated even higher, to an internal temperature of 160 degrees F. This is the temperature at which *Escherichia coli* is killed, and is considered the threshold for safe consumption of ground beef. Scientists from the [Agricultural Research Service](#) performed an experiment comparing the color of ground beef cooked on a gas grill with its internal temperature and found that there was a poor correlation between these two. Burgers, particularly those made from ground beef that had been frozen in bulk and thawed, were likely to have a brown center, even when their internal temperature was well below 160 degrees F. Also, burgers taken from the grill with pink centers are known to continue to brown, even though their internal temperature is actually decreasing. In their research, ground beef cooked to 135 degrees F and allowed to sit for about four minutes looked the same as a burger cooked to 160 degrees F. The "take home" message from this research is that color is not a reliable way of assessing doneness. A meat thermometer is an essential tool for assuring that meats are adequately cooked, and one should be available in every household.

**Safe Defrosting Methods.** The U.S. Department of Agriculture advises against defrosting food by leaving it out on the counter or by running it under hot water. Both of these methods have been shown to encourage bacteria growth which could cause food-borne illness. The methods that they consider to be safe are:

1. Defrost in the refrigerator. This method, although probably the best, does require some forethought, since it can take many hours for frozen food to thaw completely at refrigerator temperatures. For example, a pound of frozen ground beef could take up to 24 hrs. to thaw. After thawing in the refrigerator, ground meat and poultry should remain useable for an additional day or two before cooking; red meat, 3 to 5 days. Foods defrosted in the refrigerator can be refrozen without cooking, although there may be some loss of quality.
2. Soak frozen food in cold water. With this method, food to be defrosted

should be submerged in a leak-proof bag and the water should be changed every 30 minutes. This takes less time than the refrigerator method (a pound of ground beef usually thaws in about an hour) but does require more attention. If thawed completely, the food should be cooked immediately and not refrozen.

3. Defrost in a microwave. Foods can be safely and effectively defrosted in a microwave. The proper setting should be selected, based on the type of food and the amount or weight of the food to be defrosted. Food defrosted in this manner needs to be cooked immediately since it may have undergone partial cooking during the defrosting process.



Don't forget that simple hand washing is still one of the most effective ways to stop the spread of germs. It is important to wash your hands properly before handling or preparing any food, and immediately after handling raw food such as uncooked meat (especially poultry), fish, eggs and unwashed vegetables. Clean your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds (the time it takes to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star - a good way to teach children to wash thoroughly) before and after handling food. If soap and water are

not available, use an alcohol-based wipe or hand gel. Additionally, you should also make sure that all your food preparation surfaces are hygienically clean before use and decontaminate them after contact with raw food.

If you or someone in your family would like to know more about kitchen sanitation, Sign into your eDocAmerica account, click on the 'Ask eDoc' icon, and send us your questions. We would love the opportunity to assist you in answering your questions.

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