

Keeping Foods Safe Before and During Shopping

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Every little step you take to keep food safe is important not only for your wallet but also for your health as well. Food safety begins as you prepare for your trip to the grocery store. The first step is to make plans to protect your food before you head to the store. At the store, you can continue to take steps to make sure the foods you bring home will be safe.

Before you shop:

Try these tips to ensure optimum food safety practices before you go shopping:

- **Clean and organize your refrigerator and kitchen.** This will help you store your food more efficiently and organize items in a first-in, first-out order, allowing you to cut back on waste and preventing you from overbuying. Clean off countertops to make it easier to rotate food items and empty bags once you return from the store.
- **Place a cooler with ice packs in your vehicle.** Often, shopping trips involve visiting two or more stores. This means perishable foods could be in the temperature danger zone (40 °F - 140 °F) for more than two hours. Food stored in the temperature danger zone is at risk for harmful bacteria to multiply rapidly and contaminate food. Refrigerate all perishable foods within two hours or one hour if the temperature of the environment the food is in is more than 90 °F. Regardless of the season, it is a good idea to keep a cooler with ice packs in your vehicle. Even with cooler weather



temperatures, the sun will create a “greenhouse effect” in your vehicle, making it warmer than the outside temperature, resulting in an environment that can allow bacteria to quickly grow.

- **Wash reusable grocery bags, coolers and ice packs.** Using reusable grocery bags is a wonderful way to save on the excess use of plastic bags when shopping. However, because reusable bags are placed in car trunks and shopping carts, and used to carry canned food and raw food products, you should wash them weekly. Simply wash in the washing machine and air dry. This is an important way to prevent cross contamination. Wash out coolers and clean ice packs as well.

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While you shop:

Follow these guidelines to ensure optimum food safety practices while shopping:

- **Avoid purchasing dented cans.** The dented can section may seem like a deal, but the bargain may not be worth the risk. Deep dents or bulges in cans may be a sign of botulism; cans with a sharp dent may damage the seam and allow bacteria to enter the can. Avoid cans with deep dents (large enough to fit your finger), those that are bulging or rusting, or have dents on the top or side seam.
- **Pay attention to dates.** Manufacturers put dates on our food to help us determine its best quality. Except for infant formula, the dates do not indicate food safety and are not required by any laws.
A consumer may see a variety of phrases on food labels to describe quality dates:
 - “Best if Used By/Before” date indicates when a product will have its best flavor or condition. It is not a buying or safety date.
 - “Sell-By” date informs the store the length of time to display a food item for sale. It is not a safety date.
 - “Use-By” date recommends the use of the food item while it is at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for infant formula.
 - “Freeze-By” date informs consumers when a food item should be frozen to keep it at peak quality. It is not a buying or safety date.(U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service, 2019, October 2)
- **Use separate plastic bags for raw meats, poultry and seafood.** The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) discovered that shoppers were unknowingly spreading raw poultry juices into shopping carts and on other food items – even on

children – while shopping. The juice from raw meat can be easily spread, causing cross contamination. Use plastic bags to keep raw meat, poultry and seafood separate from ready-to-eat foods in carts, bags, coolers and at home.

- **Clean hands before sampling food.** Wash your hands prior to trying grocery store samples. If that isn’t possible, use the store’s free hand sanitizer or bring your own sanitizer with you, especially if you will be touching food directly with your hands. Remember you have been touching shopping carts and who knows what else!
- **Pick up frozen and refrigerated foods at the end of your shopping trip.** Since stores are not always designed to follow this guideline, organize your list to add the frozen and refrigerated items last to your shopping cart. This will keep them in the temperature danger zone for the least amount of time.

Following these guidelines will help cut down on the possibility of harmful bacteria multiplying to unsafe levels while you shop.

References and Resources

FoodSafety. Gov. (2022, January 26.) *4 steps to food safety.* <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/4-steps-to-food-safety>

U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2019, July 17), What are some food safety tips when shopping for food? *Have a Question? Ask USDA.* <https://ask.usda.gov/s/article/What-are-some-food-safety-when-shopping-for-food>

U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2019, October 2.) *Food product dating.* <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/food-product-dating>

Find out more about Michigan Food Safety at www.msue.msu.edu/safefood.