

# 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.** Be sure to look at the “sell-by” and “use-by” dates on perishable foods. If the “sell-by” date has passed, don’t buy the product. The “use-by” date applies to the date you should use by at home.

It should be noted that dates found on products are the food manufacturer’s recommendations regarding optimal quality of the product. The dates are not necessarily guides for food safety. For instance, a product may be safe to eat beyond the “best if used by” date, but would not be of highest quality.

Also in most cases, the product date is determined for a product remaining unopened and stored in a proper manner. Once opened, the quality limits of the product will vary from the date printed on the package (Cornell, USDA, Food Marketing Institute, 2014, p. 4).

- **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

Cornell University, USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, & Food Marketing Institute. (2014). *The food keeper*. (4th ed.). Retrieved from <http://stlfoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FoodExtensionList2015.pdf>

U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: [www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov)

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Find out more about Michigan Food Safety at [www.msue.msu.edu/safefood](http://www.msue.msu.edu/safefood).