

IS IT SAFE TO EAT?

SHORT OF BECOMING A FOOD INSPECTOR, HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY FROM A MEAL THAT'S UNFORGETTABLE—FOR ALL THE WRONG REASONS.

BY JEANNETTE MONINGER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEVI BROWN



When 12-year-old Mitchell Schieble of Cincinnati complained about stomach pains two winters ago, his mom figured he had caught a bug. But once Mitchell and four other area residents were hospitalized, the family learned the real diagnosis: an *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) infection brought on by contaminated lettuce from a local restaurant. Today, Mitchell still suffers from frequent bowel issues.

In Ridgefield, Connecticut, 42-year-old Lesley Poulton refuses to buy meat at a certain local grocery store after a home-cooked steak dinner sickened her and her husband four years ago. And, unfortunately, the bacon-wrapped scallops at a friend's New Year's Eve party were too good to pass up for Pilar Williams, 42, and her boyfriend. The Crofton, Maryland, couple was driving home when illness struck her boyfriend first and Pilar later. "We're never touching seafood that has been sitting out for hours again," she says. "Next year we'll be kissing when the ball drops—not taking turns in the bathroom."

Even in a country that boasts one of the world's most regulated and safest food supplies, an estimated 48 million Americans—that's one in six—are sickened every year by foodborne illness (what people commonly refer to as food poisoning). "There are countless opportunities for bacteria to sully what we eat," says Michael Doyle, PhD, director of the Center for Food Safety at the University of Georgia in Griffin. Runoff from animal waste can mix with crop water and soil. Items may be rinsed with polluted water, packed in dirty ice or kept at improper temperatures. "Cooking is the best way to kill bacteria once they start to grow inside a fruit or vegetable. No amount of rinsing will help," says Doyle. It's impossible to ensure the purity of *everything* your family eats. Still, you can take these steps to lower everyone's risk.

FROM STORE TO HOME

The do's and don'ts of ensuring groceries are good enough to eat.

DO

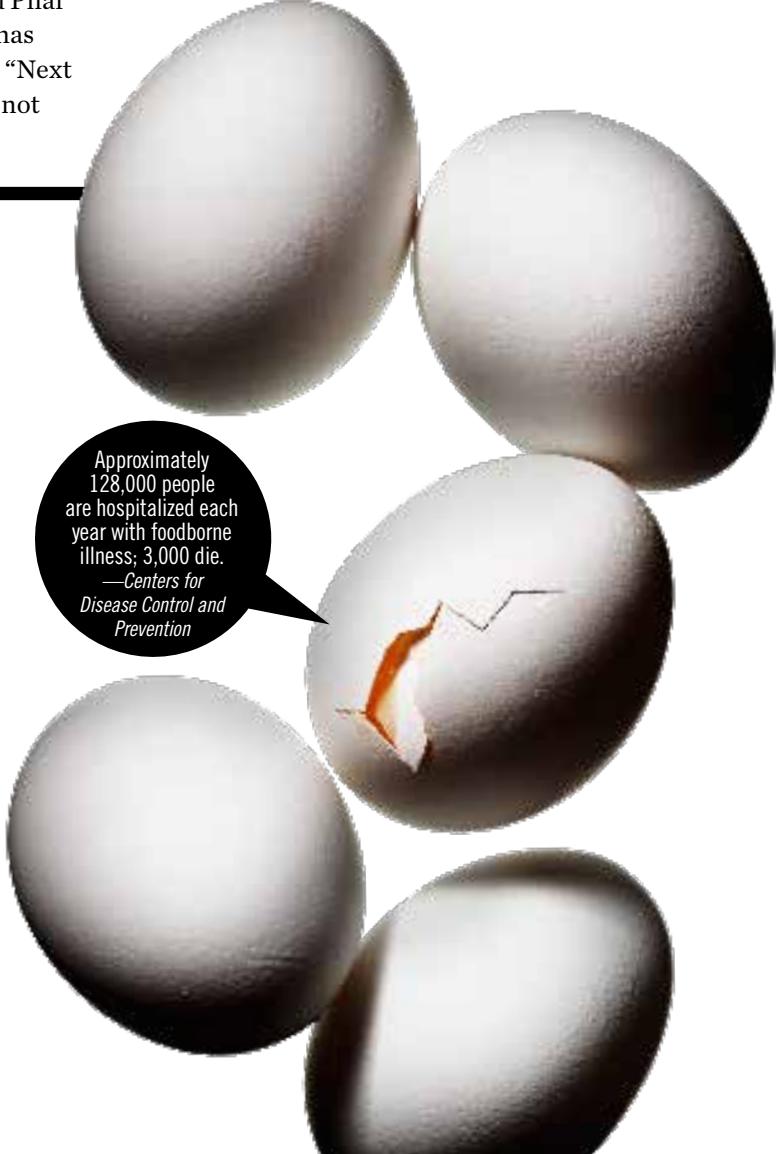
➔ **Opt for whole produce**, like an entire melon or head of lettuce. Pre-cut produce has a greater contamination risk because food from several batches is often mixed together.

➔ **Place groceries in the backseat of your car.** Food will stay cooler there than in the trunk, where airflow is restricted.

DON'T

➔ **Put raw meat directly into your shopping bag.** First place it in one of the plastic bags provided by stores. Then slide it into a reusable tote designated for meats only—which you should wash frequently in hot water.

➔ **Let raw meats mix with other foods.** Keep them in a separate area of your grocery cart.



Approximately 128,000 people are hospitalized each year with foodborne illness; 3,000 die.
—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention



Questions from the Kitchen

Q: Are unpasteurized dairy products better for my family?

A: They're actually worse. Bacteria like *E. coli* and listeria in untreated milk and cheese caused more than 2,000 foodborne illnesses and two deaths between 1998 and 2011. "If you wouldn't eat a plate of raw beef, don't drink a glass of raw milk. The dangers are the same," says Sarah Klein, senior staff attorney for the Food Safety Program at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI).

Q: Should I rinse poultry before cooking it? What about eggs?

A: No. Rinsing raw poultry can splash harmful bacteria

onto your faucet, sink and countertop. Dirt and bacteria on an eggshell can be absorbed into the egg when rinsed. Besides, eggs are washed and sanitized before being shipped to stores.

Q: Should I avoid mayonnaise-based foods?

A: "This condiment's main ingredients—vinegar, lemon juice and salt—are so acidic, they slow bacterial growth," says Doyle. You can even leave an opened jar of store-bought mayo in the pantry without worry, although refrigeration helps preserve the flavor.

Q: Will marinated meat keep longer?

A: Centuries ago, briny

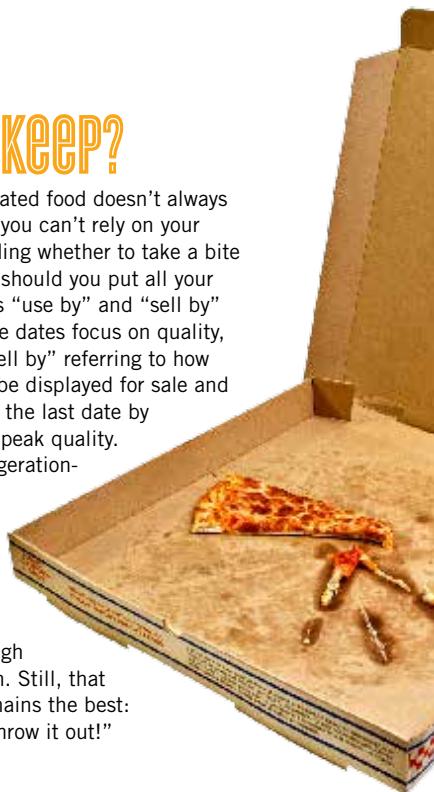
marinades were used to preserve foods. Today's marinades boost a meat's flavor and make it more tender, but they won't extend its shelf life.

Q: How safe are imported foods?

A: Between 2005 and 2010, contaminated imports like fish and spices caused more than 2,300 illnesses. But Chris Waldrop, director of the Food Policy Institute at the Consumer Federation of America, says America's food-supply chain should become safer once the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011 is fully implemented over the next few years. "Foreign companies will be required to show they're taking preventive steps to lower contamination risk," he says.

TOSS OR KEEP?

Because contaminated food doesn't always look or smell bad, you can't rely on your senses when deciding whether to take a bite of something. Nor should you put all your trust in a product's "use by" and "sell by" date stamps. Those dates focus on quality, not safety, with "sell by" referring to how long the food can be displayed for sale and "use by" signaling the last date by which it will be of peak quality. The following refrigeration-time suggestions should keep food from becoming dangerous. Frozen foods remain safe indefinitely, although taste may diminish. Still, that age-old advice remains the best: "When in doubt, throw it out!"



Food Item	Toss After
Eggs	3 to 5 weeks
Hard-boiled eggs	1 week
Bacon	1 week (raw) 4 to 5 days (cooked)
Chopped hamburger or ground meat	1 to 2 days (raw) 3 to 4 days (cooked)
Hot dogs	1 week (opened) 2 weeks (unopened)
Deli meat	3 to 5 days (opened) 2 weeks (unopened)
Steak, chops and roasts	3 to 5 days (raw) 3 to 4 days (cooked)
Poultry	1 to 2 days (raw) 3 to 4 days (cooked)
Chicken nuggets	3 to 4 days (cooked)
Fish and shellfish	1 to 2 days (raw) 3 to 4 days (cooked)
Leftover pizza	3 to 4 days
Soups and stews	3 to 4 days
Milk	2 to 3 days after sell-by date
Prepared deli salads (egg, chicken, ham, tuna, macaroni)	3 to 5 days

Sources: FoodSafety.gov, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; FDA; USDA; National Dairy Council; the American Meat Institute



FROM KITCHEN TO TABLE

Some 20% of foodborne illnesses can be traced back to your home. Even if you think your kitchen is safe, take this food-prep test to find out.

1. True or false?

You should wash your hands with warm water and soap for five seconds before and after food prep.

False. To effectively kill germs and bacteria, scrub up for at least 20 seconds (sing the alphabet song to time yourself). Almost all of us—95%—don't lather long enough.

2. True or false?

Eggs should be stored in the main part of the refrigerator.

True. Temperatures inside the fridge are more consistent than on the door, which is frequently opened and exposed to warm air. Room-temperature eggs are at risk for salmonella after two hours.

3. True or false?

You should never prepare raw meats on a wood cutting board.

False. What matters is that you use one board for meats and another for nonmeats. Sanitize cutting boards by washing with hot soapy water or in the dishwasher, or by soaking in a solution of 1 tablespoon of bleach per gallon of water.

4. True or false?

It's okay to serve marinades that have been applied to raw meat.

True. But you must bring the marinade to a rolling boil for at least one minute to be able to safely consume it.

5. True or false?

Always wash produce before refrigerating.

False. Wet produce spoils faster, plus bacteria and mold thrive and multiply in moist environments. Clean produce when you're ready to eat it.

6. True or false?

You should rinse prewashed, ready-to-eat produce.

False. Another rinse won't do any harm, but it's unlikely to remove much (if any) additional dirt or bacteria.

7. True or false?

Commercial produce cleansers are more effective than water at removing bacteria.

False. Save your money. The stuff from the tap works equally well at a fraction of the cost.



HANDLE YOUR PET'S KIBBLE WITH CARE

Dog and cat food is just as prone to bacterial contamination as human food. In 2012 nearly 50 people were sickened by salmonella-tainted dry dog food; 10 were hospitalized. The dry stuff can be riskier (for both humans and fur babies) because it isn't processed like canned pet food. Lower your family's risk of exposure by heeding the following do's and don'ts.

DO

- ➔ Keep pet food and dishes out of children's reach.
- ➔ Wash hands after every pet feeding and after cleaning up waste.
- ➔ Wear disposable plastic gloves or use a plastic bag when scooping pet waste.

DON'T

- ➔ Feed pets in the kitchen.
- ➔ Store dry pet food in the kitchen or near people food.
- ➔ Leave leftover canned pet food on the counter. Refrigerate it to prevent bacterial growth.



Food poisoning risk is highest from May through September, when raw meats and other foods are left outside in high humidity and temps above 90 degrees.
—Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

BEFORE YOU DINE OUT...

Eating at a full-service or fast-food restaurant makes you twice as likely to get sick as eating at home. In fact, 70% of readers who responded to our Facebook poll say they've experienced food poisoning after eating out. "The more people handling your food, the more opportunities for contamination," explains Sarah Klein, senior staff attorney for the Food Safety Program at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a consumer advocacy organization based in Washington, DC. Because inspection reports are nearly impossible to obtain or understand, your best bet for judging a restaurant may be using a free smartphone app like DiningGrades or Safe Eats to check out patron reviews and restaurant grades. In addition, be on the lookout for these restaurant red flags.

THE BATHROOM

➔ Wash your hands before sitting down. If the rest room is dirty or there's no hot water, eat elsewhere.

THE FLOOR

➔ Look for signs of rodents or bugs, such as droppings or bait traps tucked into corners.

THE DINING AREA

➔ Tables and chairs should be free of dried food and crumbs.

THE WAITSTAFF

➔ Scrutinize for clean hands and nails, neat attire and hair pulled back from the

face. Check out the chefs too if you can peek into the kitchen.

THE MENU

➔ Recognize the risk of eating raw foods. Sushi, sashimi and uncooked sprouts are more likely to have bacteria or parasites, as are meats ordered rare or bloody. While medium-rare is fine for fresh, unground steak, roast or chops, in general, medium is a better choice.

THE DOGGIE BAG

➔ Forget about leftovers unless you'll be home within two hours of the meal being served—one hour when outside temps are above 90 degrees.

Is it a stomach bug or food poisoning?

A: It's almost impossible to distinguish between the two, but food poisoning is likely to come on within hours of eating tainted food. So see if others who ate what you did recently fell ill. "Bloody diarrhea is also more likely to indicate a foodborne illness," adds Linda Lee, MD, director of the Johns Hopkins Integrative Medicine and Digestive Center in Lutherville, Maryland. Either way, see a doctor if you've had to spend extra time in the bathroom, have a fever above 101 degrees, are dehydrated or have had diarrhea (possibly bloody) lasting more than five days (two days for an infant or child).