

Handling Ready-to-Eat Food



Public Health Reasons

Ready-to-eat (RTE) foods are foods that do not need further preparation before eating. Ready-to-eat foods include:

- raw animal food that is cooked according to U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines (See “Handling Raw Animal Foods” fact sheet)
- raw fruits and vegetables that are washed (See “Handling Fresh Produce” fact sheet)
- fruits and vegetables that are cooked for hot-holding
- plant food that does not require further washing, cooking, or processing to be safe and from which rinds, peels, husks, or shells are removed, such as nuts
- substances derived from plants such as spices, seasonings, and sugar
- bakery items for which further cooking is not required such as bread, cakes, pies, or icing
- dry fermented sausages (dry salami or pepperoni), salt-cured meat and poultry products (prosciutto ham, country cured ham, and Parma ham), and dried meat and poultry products (jerky and beef sticks) that are produced in accordance with United States Department of Agriculture guidelines and have received lethality treatment for pathogens
- thermally processed low-acid foods packaged in hermetically sealed containers

Viral agents cause more foodborne outbreaks than bacterial agents. Norovirus, which has been reported to cause 58% of foodborne disease in the United States, can cause an infection after ingestion of as little as 18 viral particles. It only takes 10 viral particles for rotavirus to cause an infection. The infectious dose of hepatitis A virus is unknown, but presumed to be between 10-100 viral particles. Guzewich and Ross reviewed foodborne outbreaks from 1975 to 1998 and found that noroviruses and hepatitis A virus accounted for 60% of all outbreaks reviewed. Greig and colleagues reviewed 816 foodborne outbreaks between 1927 and 2006 where food workers were implicated in the spread of the pathogens. They found that viruses caused 60.2% of outbreaks and noroviruses or probable noroviruses accounted for 41.4% of the total outbreaks. Viruses are more likely to cause outbreaks attributed to ready-to-eat foods because of their small infectious doses.

For these reasons, the FDA Food Code does not allow foodservice staff to handle cooked ready-to-eat foods with their bare hands, especially when working with highly susceptible populations, such as young children. Instead, utensils such as spatulas, tongs, or single-use gloves must be used during preparation and serving. Contaminant microorganisms on hands, such as pathogens, are less bound to skin than the resident microflora and are readily transferred from hands

to food or food-contact surfaces by direct contact. Gloves can prevent hands from becoming contaminated with microorganisms in the food environment. However, contamination on the gloves is just the same as on the hands, and failure to change gloves when soiled or when switching tasks can also lead to contamination of foods and surfaces.

Practices

- Use disposable, single-use gloves when preparing ready-to-eat foods.

Never handle ready-to-eat foods with bare hands.

- The following types of gloves can be used:
 - fitted, disposable, latex gloves (may cause allergic reactions in the user and consumer)
 - fitted, disposable, non-latex gloves (made from polyethylene)
 - non-form-fitted, disposable gloves (made from polyethylene or vinyl)
- To avoid cross-contamination, wash hands properly and thoroughly before putting on gloves and when changing to a new pair (See “Practicing Good Hand Hygiene for Food Workers” fact sheet).

Never use gloves in place of hand washing.

- Discard gloves when:
 - they are damaged or soiled
 - changing from handling raw meat, seafood, or eggs to handling ready-to-eat foods
 - when touching refrigerator handles or trash containers
 - after coughing or sneezing

Never wash or reuse gloves.

- Use utensils that are clean and sanitized when working with ready-to-eat food. Examples include the following:
- Change utensils when they become contaminated. For example, when the part of the utensil that is in contact with food touches bare hands or unclean surfaces.
- Use separate equipment for ready-to-eat foods and raw animal foods to prevent cross-contamination.

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