

Preparing Frozen Food

WASHINGTON, Sept. 23, 2020 – New research from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reveals that consumers may not know how to safely cook frozen foods, which can put families at risk of getting foodborne illness in their homes.

“As consumers are preparing more meals at home, it is important that these cooks are practicing food safety in their kitchens” says Dr. Mindy Brashears, USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety. “Our research shows that home cooks should read product labels to understand how to properly prepare an item, and not rely solely on appearance.”

Consumers may not know that some frozen foods are not fully cooked or ready to eat, especially if they have browned breading, grill marks or other signs that normally show that a product has been cooked. In a recent USDA study, 22 percent of participants said a not-ready-to-eat frozen chicken entrée was either cooked, partially cooked, or they weren’t sure that the product was in fact raw.

Frozen foods are convenient for busy families, because of how quickly they can be prepared. Frozen food products are also a great option because children can easily prepare frozen meals on their own. It is especially important for children to know how to practice the necessary food safety steps needed to prepare frozen meals to avoid foodborne illness, and to help them do so, parents must first understand if products are raw or ready-to-eat.

“Although some frozen products may look cooked, it is important to follow the same food safety guidelines as you would if you were cooking a fresh, raw product,” says Dr. Brashears. “Wash your hands before food preparation and after handling raw frozen products, and use a food thermometer to make sure your frozen meals reach a safe internal temperature.”

Among national survey respondents who had experience with foodborne illnesses, 61 percent reported they did not make changes to how they handled food at home after being sick, which is concerning when you consider that more than half of survey respondents reported that someone in their home was considered at-risk for foodborne illness. These individuals — children, older adults, pregnant women, and those with compromised immune systems — are unable to fight infection as effectively as others, so they can be susceptible to longer illness, hospitalization and even death from foodborne illness.

USDA shares the following recommendations to keep your family safe when preparing frozen meals.

1. Inadequate handwashing is a contributing factor to all sorts of illness, including foodborne illness. It is important to follow proper handwashing steps before, during and after preparing frozen food to prevent germs from transferring from your hands to your meal.
 - In this study, 97 percent of participants did not attempt to wash their hands during meal prep to prevent cross-contamination, which is consistent with results from previous observational studies.
 - Of those who tried, 95 percent failed to wash their hands properly. There are five steps for proper handwashing: wet, lather with soap, scrub for 20 seconds, rinse and dry.
 - Most participants failed to rub their hands with soap for a full 20 seconds.

2. Although frozen products may appear to be pre-cooked or browned, they should be handled and prepared no differently than raw products and must be cooked. Frozen products may be labeled with phrases such as “Cook and Serve,” “Ready to Cook” and “Oven Ready” to indicate they must be cooked.
3. Always use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of your frozen meat and poultry products to determine whether they are safe to eat.
 - Beef, pork, lamb and veal (steaks, roasts and chops): 145 degrees Fahrenheit with a three-minute rest time.
 - Ground meats (beef, pork, lamb and veal): 160 degrees Fahrenheit
 - Poultry (whole or ground): 165 degrees Fahrenheit.
4. Frozen and raw produce may also carry germs that can cause foodborne illness. It is important to handle produce properly to prevent the spread of germs to your food and kitchen.
 - When preparing the frozen corn for a salad, almost all participants in the study failed to follow the manufacturer’s instructions to check that it reached a safe internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit. A food thermometer is the only safe way to know if it reaches that temperature.
 - Even if you are preparing a cold salad, frozen produce must be cooked first.
 - If you are handling fresh produce, follow recommendations from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to rinse and scrub raw vegetables prior to peeling them. When preparing a cucumber for the salad, nearly half of participants rinsed and scrubbed the surface of the cucumber with their hands instead of using a vegetable brush while rinsing; FDA recommends using a brush for cucumbers and other hard vegetables.
5. Check that frozen food in your freezer has not been recalled. You can find information about recalled items and how to handle them on the USDA and FDA websites.
 - After learning about a recalled item, 94 percent of survey respondents who had the item in their home followed the recommendations from the recall: to discard the item or return it to the store.
 - Consumers can visit [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov) or the USDA’s [FoodKeeper application](https://www.usda.gov/foodkeeper) to view all food recall information from USDA and the FDA.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that millions of Americans are sickened with foodborne illnesses each year, resulting in roughly 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths. Follow these food safety recommendations to decrease the risk of foodborne illness in your home.

These findings are part of a multi-year, mixed-method study that FSIS commissioned to evaluate various consumer food handling behaviors. The study uses test kitchens, focus groups and nationally representative surveys to better understand food safety practices and experiences with food recalls, foodborne illness, and FSIS food safety resources. More information about this study is available in an [executive summary](#).

Have questions? Need more food safety information? Call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MP-HOTLINE (1-888-674-6854) or chat live at ask.usda.gov from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday, in English or Spanish.

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