



NEWS RELEASE

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Holiday Leftovers When Dining Out

The holiday season typically includes a special time spent dining with family and friends. If asked what we planned to make for that holiday meal, many of us might answer: RESERVATIONS! Eating out removes many decisions, but still includes several important choices. After deciding what to order, whether to have dessert and how much to tip, there's one more important decision: how to handle the leftovers. Here are five action steps to take with leftovers:

1. Leave Your Leftovers if You Can't Refrigerate or Freeze Them within Two Hours from Time of Service. TWO hours is the maximum time perishable foods should be at room temperature. This INCLUDES the time they're on the table during your meal. Just ONE bacterium, doubling every 20 minutes, can grow to over 32,768 bacteria in five hours!

Perishable foods include meat, poultry and seafood, dairy products, cooked pasta, rice and vegetables and fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables. Also, if food is left out too long, some bacteria, such as *staphylococcus aureus* (*staph*), can form a heat-resistant toxin that cooking can't destroy. Say farewell to your food and leave perishable leftovers at the restaurant if you can't refrigerate or freeze them within TWO hours. Or, eat defensively and divide larger entrees with your table mates so there are no leftovers.

2. Cool Leftovers Quickly in Shallow Containers in Your Refrigerator. Key points in cooling hot leftovers include:
 - Refrigerate and cool leftovers in shallow containers; limit food depth to about 2 inches.
 - Let the refrigerator cool leftovers—get them in there quickly, don't wait.
3. Eat Leftovers in One to Two Days or Freeze Them for Longer Storage. For best safety and quality, eat leftovers in a day or two. Or, freeze them at 0°F if you'd like to keep them longer. At 0°F, frozen leftovers are safe indefinitely; however the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA/FSIS) recommends most foods will have best quality if used within two to four months.
4. Reheat Leftovers to 165°F. Reheat leftovers to 165°F until they're steaming hot throughout. At this temperature, harmful bacteria should be destroyed. Stir to promote even heating. However, remember as described in action Step 1, certain toxins formed by bacteria can be heat resistant. It's still important to follow the "two-hour rule" regardless of how high and how long you heat a food.

Beware of microwaving leftovers in the original take home container. At high temperatures, certain containers, such as foam containers, may not be stable. It's possible that melting or warping may cause harmful chemicals to migrate into the food.

5. When in Doubt, Toss Leftovers Out. Suppose you:
 - left your leftovers on the car seat overnight;
 - let your leftovers sit over a week in the refrigerator; or
 - forgot your frozen leftovers on the kitchen counter all day.

Is there any way to know if they're still safe to eat? You cannot see or smell most bacteria that might make you sick. That's why the advice most frequently given is: WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT! "Ring out the old, ring in the new" is an oft-quoted phrase from Tennyson on the passing of the old year and the coming of the next. Apply that to old leftovers!

Source: *FOOD REFLECTIONS* Newsletter, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County (lancaster.unl.edu/food/foodtalk.htm)