



# **Food Safety During Pregnancy: 4 Essential Steps to Protect Mom and Baby From Foodborne Illness**

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Pregnancy is a time of change, and moms-to-be have a lot to think about—for themselves and for their babies. Food safety and preventing *foodborne illness*—when you get sick from contaminated foods—is very important during this time.

Pregnant women and their developing babies have weaker immune systems. This means that you and your baby have a higher chance of getting sick from harmful bacteria when foods are not cooked properly or from contaminated foods.



The good news is that there are four easy steps that you can take to protect you and your baby and to prevent foodborne illness. Read below to learn more about how to handle foods safely.

## **Step 1: Clean**

You are probably very familiar with the healthy practice of washing your hands, especially before eating and when handling or preparing foods. This food safety step is very important when you are pregnant.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that you wash your hands often using five easy steps, with warm soap and water, for at least 20 seconds. Remember to wash your hands before and after you eat, after playing with your pets, and after using the bathroom.



The five steps of proper handwashing are to first wet your hands, then lather, scrub, rinse, and dry them. *Image from "Safe food handling," by the Food and Drug Administration, 2024* (<https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/safe-food-handling>).

Another tip to keep hands clean is to dry your hands with a clean towel or paper towels. Did you know that your kitchen towel could be a place for germs? Change and wash them frequently. Alcohol wipes or sanitizer gels are a good option in a pinch, but using soap and water is best to fight foodborne illness.

During pregnancy you can still get sick from dirty kitchen surfaces, dirty utensils, and even from unwashed fruits and vegetables. Clean your countertops, refrigerator, and cutting boards with soapy, hot water. Wash raw fruits and vegetables with cold water, and scrub vegetables with thicker skin, like potatoes and cantaloupe, with a small vegetable brush. Paying attention to these details can go a long way in keeping your food safe.

## **Step 2: Separate (Don't Cross-Contaminate!)**

The next step pregnant women can take to prevent foodborne illness is to keep foods separate. When grocery shopping, for example, keep raw meats, chicken, and seafood separated from your other grocery items and foods, both in your cart and when bagging your items at the checkout. Keep this same rule when you get home:

- Store your raw meats and seafood on the bottom shelf of your refrigerator and away from your other food items. Seal any leaky packages, as this raw meat "juice" has a ton of germs that can cause illness.
- During food preparation, use different cutting boards for raw meats and your vegetables/fruits. If this is not possible, cut up your vegetables first, wash the cutting board with soap and hot water, and then prepare your raw meats. Wash your cutting



board again.

- Make sure you have separate plates for storing and preparing raw meat, and then another clean plate for cooked meat or other foods.
- Finally, marinades used with raw meat or seafood have bacteria that can make you sick. Always remember to throw away the marinade and don't reuse it.

## Step 3: Cook

How often do you use a food/meat thermometer when you cook? Many people often think meat, eggs, poultry, and fish are cooked well enough based on the way they look. This can be dangerous for pregnant women.

Step 3 in food safety is cooking foods, especially meats, to the proper temperature. The best way to do this is to use a meat thermometer.

- Some general temperature guidelines are below:
- Cook ground beef and pork to an internal temperature of 160 °F.
- Cook whole cuts of beef, lamb, and pork to at least 145 °F.
- Cook poultry (chicken and turkey) to an internal temperature of 165 °F.
- Cook fish to at least 145 °F.
- Cook eggs until the yolk is firm (NOT runny!), and cook scrambled eggs until they are firm all the way through.



Find a full list of foods and a [food temperature chart on the FDA website](https://www.foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/safe-minimum-internal-temperatures) (<https://www.foodsafety.gov/food-safety-charts/safe-minimum-internal-temperatures>).

The safest way to eat leftovers is to reheat them to an internal temperature of 165 °F. If reheating foods in a microwave, make sure to rotate the food for even reheating, and check the temperature with a food thermometer after allowing some standing time (which finishes the cooking). A couple of temperature rules for food safety include:

- Watch out for “The Danger Zone”—the temperature range in which bacteria can grow—between 40 °F and 140 °F. Throw away any perishable foods that have been left out in this zone (room temperature) for more than 2 hr. This is also called the “2-hour rule.”
- Try to stick to the “2-hour rule” during family gatherings, picnics, and parties. This means putting perishable foods in the refrigerator within 2 hr of preparation, or within 1 hr if it’s warmer than 90 °F (outdoor events).

## Step 4: Chill

The final step in general food safety tips for pregnant women is to make sure that perishable foods like dairy, eggs, meats, poultry, and leftovers are kept in the refrigerator. Keep a thermometer in your refrigerator to make sure that foods are stored below 40 °F. **Do not** defrost foods at room temperature.

The three ways to safely defrost frozen foods are:

1. in the refrigerator,
2. in cold water (changing the water every 30 min), or
3. in the microwave.

When you and your family are enjoying an outdoor event, make sure to pack your cooler full using bags of ice or ice packs. Finally, remember these four words for food safety during pregnancy: **Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill.**

## References

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