Cooking your food

How to cook your food to prevent food poisoning.

Cooking food at the right temperature and for the correct length of time will kill any harmful bacteria that may be present. Always check the advice on food packaging and follow the cooking instructions provided.

Meat

Before you serve?pork, poultry, game birds?and minced meat, make sure it is steaming hot and cooked all the way through. When you cut into the thickest part of the meat, check that none of the meat is pink and that any juices run clear. In a whole bird this is the area between the leg and the breast.

Follow this advice when cooking:

- turkey
- chicken
- duck
- all game birds, such as pheasant and pigeon. Pregnant women should avoid game birds as game bird meat may contain lead shot. You can find further guidance on foods to avoid during pregnancy on the NHS website.
- pork
- minced meat products such as kebabs, sausages and burgers

When you roast whole birds such as chicken or turkey, you should cook the stuffing separately, not inside the bird. This is because stuffed birds will take longer to cook and may not cook thoroughly.

FSA Explains: Avian Influenza

Properly cooked poultry, game birds and other poultry products are safe to eat. Avian Influenza (also known as bird flu) poses a very low food safety risk for UK consumers, and does not change our advice on consumption of poultry products, including eggs and game birds.

DEFRA has further advice on Avian Influenza.

Northern Ireland

For Northern Ireland specific advice on Avian Influenza please refer to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

Frozen vegetables

Most frozen vegetables, including sweetcorn, will need to be cooked before you can eat them.

If you intend to use frozen sweetcorn or other vegetables as part of a cold salad, check the instructions on the packaging first. If the advice is that the sweetcorn or other frozen vegetables should be cooked, you must ensure that this is done before they are eaten cold.

After cooking, the food should be:

- cooled down as quickly as possible (ideally within two hours)
- stored in a fridge
- eaten within two days
- frozen to eat later, if you think you won’t be able to eat it within two days

For more information on safely cooling and storing foods, including freezing advice, read our guidance on chilling food.

Cooking methods

When food is cooked in an oven, it is through a combination of three different heat transfer methods.

Radiant or direct heat

This is where the flames at the back of a gas oven or the element in an electric oven cook the food.

Conduction

This is where the heat travels through the shelf, into the baking tray/dish and then on into the food.

Convection

This is where the air within the oven is heated and travels over and through the food. It is particularly important in a fan assisted oven and is the reason these cook foods faster.

Alternative cooking methods

Meals can also be prepared using appliances such as a microwave, crock pot or air fryer. Depending on the cooking method and appliance efficiency, foods will require different times and temperatures to be properly cooked. Also, while different foods can be cooked together, they may require different times and temperatures.

Please refer to the instructions for your appliance for cooking advice on specific foods. In some appliances, you should leave some space around the food so that it can cook properly e.g. chicken legs in an air fryer.

When cooking pork, poultry or minced meat (including burgers and sausages), make sure they are steaming hot and cooked all the way through before serving. Cut through the thickest part of the meat to ensure none of the meat is pink and the juices run clear.

If you are heating food in a microwave, it’s important to stir the food halfway through heating and to make sure that it is steaming hot before eating. Microwaves can heat in ‘pockets’ so stirring ensures that there are no pockets of cold food in your meal.

Why you shouldn't serve burgers rare or pink

Whole cuts of meat, such as steaks and joints, only ever have bacteria on the outside surface of the meat.

When meat is minced to make a burger, any harmful bacteria from the surface of the meat can get spread throughout the burger. As a result, rare and undercooked burgers can have harmful bacteria on the inside and may cause food poisoning if not fully cooked.