

Food safety in a heatwave - advice for consumers

How to avoid food poisoning and food waste during a heatwave.

Bacteria that cause food poisoning can multiply faster in higher temperatures. During the warmest times of the year, food can quickly get into the temperature range that encourages bacteria to grow. This can mean foods are riskier to eat if not prepared or stored correctly.

In extremely hot weather, it's important to take extra precautions to keep your food safe.

How to store food safely during higher temperatures

You can check your fridge is cold enough using a fridge thermometer.

Your fridge should be between 0 and 5°C. You can use the built-in dial/gauge inside the fridge to change the power setting (typically the higher the value the more power the fridge uses to take the temperature down; if in doubt, check the manufacturer's instructions for your fridge). Note: this built in dial/gauge does not represent the temperature in °C. If possible, buy a thermometer to monitor the temperature.

Don't overfill your fridge. Leaving space allows air to circulate and maintains the set temperature. It may be useful to buy some foods as and when during a heatwave, as this can allow for space in the fridge, and avoid food waste.

Keep food chilled for as long as possible

Defrost frozen foods slowly in the fridge. When preparing food, put it back in the fridge quickly after using it and eat food as soon as possible after cooking. After cooking, put leftovers in the fridge quickly after it has cooled. You should try not to leave food out for longer than two hours when temperatures are higher than usual.

Keep food cool when shopping

When shopping, select chilled and frozen items last. If possible, pack them straight into cool bags with ice or frozen gel packs in them at the checkout or as you are shopping and scanning. Keep your shopping in the boot of the car on your way home, as this is a shadier spot. Put fridge and freezer items away first when unpacking at home.

Keep food cool when outside

Use a separate cool bag for picnic food, keeping it closed until you plan to eat and try to minimise the number of times you open the lid. Try to keep food and picnic bags out of direct sunlight by finding some shade. Any foods which you would usually keep in the fridge at home also need to be kept cool on your picnic. This includes:

- any food with a use-by date
- cooked dishes

- prepared salads and sandwiches
- cut fruits and vegetables
- dairy products
- any ready-to-eat foods like dips

Use frozen ice packs and cool bags or boxes to keep food cool for longer. [After a BBQ](#) or [picnic](#), throw away any perishables that have been out of the fridge for **more than two hours** during hotter than usual weather. It might be a good idea to think about using cool bags and ice packs when travelling with food in hot weather, too.

Protect people who are vulnerable to illness

Some people are at increased risk of [food poisoning](#). These can include young children, older people and people with an underlying health condition.

For these people, extra caution should be taken to ensure food safety:

- if you are uncertain how long something has been out of the fridge, take a precautionary approach and avoid giving it to the vulnerable person
- check your fridge temperature is below 5°C, use a separate fridge thermometer if possible
- be extra careful to [check use-by dates on food](#) - don't risk eating anything after this date
- avoid serving risky foods such as unpasteurised cheeses and smoked fish
- [cook food thoroughly](#) to avoid food poisoning
- wash fruits and veg thoroughly before eating

You may also find the following information useful:

- [Food safety in a power cut - advice for consumers](#)
- [Heatwave: how to cope in hot weather \(NHS\)](#)
- [Keeping food safe on a picnic](#)
- [Best before and use-by dates](#)
- [BBQ food safety](#)