

Food Safety for Mothers and Babies

Expectant mothers and those preparing food for them should be especially diligent when following safe food handling recommendations. Any illness a pregnant woman contracts can affect her unborn child, whose immune system is too immature to fight back.

FOOD SAFETY TIPS

- Never eat raw meat — such as steak tartare (a raw hamburger dish) — poultry or seafood, especially raw oysters and clams.
- Do not eat raw or undercooked eggs and any food containing them such as Caesar salad, mousse, some custards, homemade ice cream and homemade mayonnaise.
- Do not drink raw or unpasteurized milk or foods made from raw milk.
- Do not eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert, blue, and Mexican-style soft white types such as queso blanco and queso fresco.
- Avoid food from deli counters and thoroughly reheat lunchmeats and hot dogs.
- Make sure food is thoroughly cooked.
- Before eating stuffing cooked inside whole poultry, be sure it has reached 165 °F.

LISTERIA MONOCYTOGENES

These foodborne bacteria can cause miscarriage and illness in newborns. *Listeria* has been found in unpasteurized milk, imported soft cheese, hot dogs, lunchmeats and spreads. To control *Listeria*, refrigerate any food marked “refrigerate”. Do not buy or use foods that are past their “use-by” dates. Do not keep sealed, unopened lunchmeats or spreads more than two weeks. Do not eat soft cheeses, refrigerated meat spreads or refrigerated smoked seafood (canned are safe). Do not eat hot dogs, luncheon meats or deli meats unless they are reheated until steaming hot.

METHYLMERCURY IN FISH

Seafood can be an important part of a balanced diet for pregnant women. It is a good source of high quality protein and other nutrients and is low in fat. However, methylmercury in fish, if eaten regularly, can harm an unborn child’s or a young child’s developing nervous

system. Always follow the advice of your doctor or health care provider. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has recommended the following guidelines for pregnant women and small children.

- Avoid eating large fish that can possibly contain high levels of methylmercury (shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish).
- Eat up to 12 ounces (two average meals) a week of a variety of fish and shellfish that are lower in mercury. Five commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury are shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish.
- Albacore (“white”) tuna and tuna steaks have more mercury than canned light tuna. Limit albacore tuna and tuna steaks to six ounces (one average meal) per week.
- Limit freshwater fish caught by family and friends to one meal (six ounces for an adult, two ounces for a young child) a week of cooked fish, and don’t consume any other fish that week.

For more information about the levels of mercury in specific types of fish, see the FDA food safety website at www.cfsan.fda.gov/~frf/sea-mehg.html. Special advisories on fish caught from local waters can be obtained from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (S.C. DHEC) at 1 (803) 898-4399 or 1 (888) 849-7241, or on the web at <http://www.scdhec.net/eqc/admin/html/fishadv.html>

SAFE FOOD HANDLING

Shopping: Do not buy cans or glass jars with dents, cracks or bulging lids.

Cold Storage: Choose perishable foods last at the grocery store and go straight home and refrigerate or freeze the food immediately. Use an appliance thermometer to be sure the refrigerator is 40 °F or lower and freezer is 0 °F to keep food at safe temperatures. Store canned goods in a cool, dry place for use within a year. Never put them above the stove, under the sink or in a garage or damp basement.

Thawing: Do not thaw food on the counter! Bacteria multiply quickly at room temperature. Defrost food in

the refrigerator, in cold water or in the microwave just before cooking.

Food Preparation: Keep work areas clean. Wash hands, utensils and cutting boards in warm, soapy water before and after preparing food. Sanitize with a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach per quart of water after handling raw meat or poultry.

Cook Thoroughly: Use a thermometer to be sure foods reach proper temperatures to destroy any bacteria present. Cook beef, lamb and veal steaks, roasts and chops to 145 °F for medium rare or 160 °F for medium. Cook ground meats, pork and eggs to 160 °F, poultry, stuffing, casseroles and leftovers to 165 °F. Eggs should be cooked solid, both yolk and white.

Serving and Handling Food: Never leave food out at room temperature more than two hours. Divide food into shallow containers for quick cooling in the refrigerator and promptly refrigerate it. For buffets, keep cold food cold and hot food hot, and everything clean.

SAFE HANDLING OF BABY BOTTLES

Clean: Wash bottles, bottle caps and nipples in the dishwasher or hand wash, rinse and boil for five minutes or more just before refilling.

Refrigerate: Keep filled bottles of formula or breast milk in the refrigerator until just before feeding. Refrigerate open containers of ready-to-feed or concentrated formula.

Warming: Place bottles in hot (not boiling) water for 5 minutes. Shake well and test milk temperature by shaking a few drops on your wrist to make sure it is not too hot before feeding. The milk should barely feel warm.

Microwave: Never microwave baby bottles. Microwaves heat unevenly resulting in “hot spots” that can scald the baby’s mouth and throat.

SAFELY STORE BREAST MILK

- Store breast milk in the refrigerator or a freezer in sterilized bottles.
- Label each container with the name of the child, date and time milk was pumped.
- Refrigerate promptly and use within two days, or freeze and use within two weeks.

SAFELY STORE BABY’S BOTTLES

- Discard used milk from bottles immediately. Bacteria from the baby’s mouth contaminate the milk where it can grow and multiply.
- Discard unused prepared formula after 24 hours and unused breast milk after 48 hours.
- Discard open containers of ready-to-feed or concentrated formula after 48 hours.

SAFELY HANDLE JARS OF BABY FOOD

- Throw out baby food jars if the “use-by” date has passed.
- Check to see that the safety button in the lid is down. If the jar lid doesn’t “pop” when opened, or is not sealed completely, don’t use it.
- Do not heat baby foods jars in the microwave. Follow instructions above for warming bottles. Or, spoon a portion into a microwave safe dish and heat on HIGH for about eight seconds. Stir, let stand briefly and stir again. Test for luke-warm temperature before feeding.

SAFELY STORE OPENED OR FRESHLY MADE BABY FOOD:

- Store strained fruits and vegetables for two to three days in the refrigerator or for six to eight months in the freezer.
- Store strained meats and eggs, and meat and vegetable combinations for a day in the refrigerator or for one to two months in freezer.
- For individual servings, freeze strained foods in ice cube trays then place cubes in freezer bags.

CAN I FEED MY INFANT DIRECTLY FROM THE JAR OF BABY FOOD?

No, because the surface of the container has not been cleaned and may contain harmful bacteria. Also, bacteria from the baby’s mouth contaminate the food, where it can grow and multiply before being served again. Too many bacteria can make the baby sick.

For more information on safe handling of foods, request HGIC 3500, Basics of Safe Food Handling.

SOURCES:

1. FDA/CFSAN (2004, March). *What You Need to Know About Mercury in Fish and Shellfish*. [WWW document]. URL <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/admehg3.html>
2. Mississippi State University Extension Service. Fact sheets: 58, 59, 60, 71 and 72. March 1998.
3. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. *Expectant Mothers and Foodborne Illness*. June 1997.

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Information Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University.

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