



Safe Handling of Ground Meat

Ground meat has been linked to several outbreaks of foodborne illness in the United States. The most notable was in 1993, when four children in the Pacific Northwest died after eating undercooked hamburgers at a fast food restaurant.

When ground meat (as well as any meat) is not handled safely, it can become contaminated with harmful microorganisms. To prevent foodborne illness, handle ground meat safely from the time you buy it until you eat it. Here are some tips to help you.

At the grocery store

Don't cross-contaminate. Put ground meat in a plastic bag before putting it into your grocery cart. Ground meat juices might contain bacteria that can contaminate other foods. If these foods are not cooked, the bacteria will survive and could cause foodborne illness.

Also, put ground meat (and other foods that require refrigeration/freezing) in your cart last. Make the grocery store your last stop before going home.

In the refrigerator or freezer

Keep ground meat cold—40°F or colder. Store ground meat in the coldest part of your refrigerator—usually toward the back. Also make sure that your refrigerator is no warmer than 38°F. Buy and use a refrigerator thermometer.

Store ground meat (and other raw meats) on the bottom shelf—away from cooked or ready-to-eat foods—to prevent cross-contamination.

If freezing either cooked or uncooked ground meat, wrap and seal it well. This will prevent nearby frozen foods from being contaminated by the raw product while it is freezing. It will also protect the flavor, color, moisture content,

and nutritive value from the dry air inside the freezer.

Ground meat has a shorter refrigerator shelf life than do whole cuts of beef—it will last about one to two days. Grinding spreads bacteria through the meat and also incorporates air. Discoloration is usually the first sign of spoilage. A rancid odor is another sign. The freezer shelf life of uncooked ground meat is about three to four months.

While preparing

Wash your hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before handling foods. Your hands might contain bacteria or other microorganisms that could contaminate the meat and make you sick.

Wash your cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops with warm, soapy water before and after preparing ground meat and before you work with the next food. To increase safety, sanitize these surfaces using a solution of one tablespoon of unscented bleach mixed with one gallon of warm (not hot) water.

Never leave ground meat on the counter to thaw. Bacteria that are naturally present in the meat will grow if the meat temperature rises

above 40°F. Safe thawing methods include:

- Placing it in the refrigerator *or*
- Thawing it in the microwave or making thawing a part of the cooking process.

During cooking

Cook ground meat to 160°F or hotter. The center of patties and meat loaf should not be pink, and the juices should run clear. Cook crumbled ground meats until no pink color remains.

Eating pink or undercooked ground meat has been associated with outbreaks of *E. coli* 0157:H7, a deadly bacteria. Cooking kills *E. coli* 0157:H7, as well as other harmful microorganisms.

When baking foods that contain ground meat, set the oven temperature to no lower than 325°F.

Also, never partially cook ground meat and cool it. Partial cooking can allow some bacteria to survive and can even heat-shock some kinds, making it more difficult to kill them when you resume cooking. The time lag between the initial cooking and serving simply allows the bacteria to grow and even produce toxin.

Check the temperature using a food thermometer. You can buy a food thermometer at a department or grocery store for \$5 to \$12.

When cooking in a microwave oven, cover the food, stir it, and rotate the dish for even cooking. If there is no turntable, rotate the dish by hand once or twice during cooking. Let it stand for a few minutes after removing it from the oven to complete cooking.

After cooking

To prevent cross-contamination, never put cooked meat on the same plate that contained raw meat. Also, never leave cooked foods out for more than two hours. Refrigerate promptly.

After dinner

Divide large amounts of leftovers into small, shallow containers for quick cooling in the refrigerator. Do not overload your refrigerator. Air must circulate freely to cool all foods evenly.

To reheat ground meat, cover and heat it to 165°F or until it is hot and steaming throughout.

For more information on the Internet about kitchen thermometers, go to <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/thermy/kitchen.htm>

Prepared by
Angela M. Fraser, Ph.D., Food Safety Education Specialist,
and **Heather J. Hickman**, Food Scientist
North Carolina State University