

USDA Food Safety News Alert

Cleaning the Office Refrigerator

When it comes to safe food handling, everything that comes in contact with food must be kept clean -- including the refrigerator. You probably keep your refrigerator at home clean, but the office refrigerator may be a problem because it's typically a shared responsibility. Here are some tips that may help:



■ **Keep it at a safe temperature (38-40 °F)** - Refrigeration slows bacterial growth. Bacteria exist everywhere in nature. They are in the soil, air, water, and the foods we eat. When they have nutrients (food), moisture, and favorable temperatures, they grow rapidly, increasing in numbers to the point where some types of bacteria can cause illness.

Bacteria grow most rapidly in the range of temperatures between 40 and 140 °F, the "Danger Zone," some doubling in number in as little as 20 minutes. A refrigerator set at 40 °F or below will protect most foods. Foods kept in the danger zone (room temperature) for more than 2 hours should be thrown away – do not place in the fridge.

Appliance thermometers for refrigerators are specifically designed to provide accuracy at cold temperatures and can be purchased at the local hardware store.

■ **Keep it clean** - If your office doesn't already have a schedule for cleaning, make it a habit to throw out perishable foods left in the refrigerator at least once a week. (every Friday afternoon). A general rule of thumb for refrigerator storage for cooked leftovers is 4 days. Anyone placing food in the refrigerator should take time to label items with name and date.

Wipe up spills immediately before they turn into a major cleaning job. Clean surfaces thoroughly with hot, soapy water; then rinse.

Refer to the **Storage Times for the Refrigerator & Freezer** chart on the next page for storage guidelines of perishable products in the refrigerator. Print a copy and post on the refrigerator door as a reminder for all who use it. Any container past the expiration date (or unlabeled) should be discarded.

To keep the refrigerator smelling fresh and help eliminate odors, place an opened box of baking soda on a shelf and replace monthly. Avoid using solvent cleaning agents, abrasives, and all cleansers that may impart a chemical taste to food or ice cubes, or cause damage to the interior finish of the refrigerator. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.

■ **Share the responsibility** - Not everyone may realize the importance of keeping all food contact surfaces, like the refrigerator and kitchen counter tops, clean. Because bacteria are everywhere and food residue on counters attracts bugs, cleanliness is a major factor in preventing foodborne illness. Post this on the office refrigerator as a reminder for coworkers and volunteers.

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE—Storage Times for the Refrigerator & Freezer

These short but generally safe time limits for refrigerated foods will keep most foods from spoiling or becoming dangerous to eat.

Category	Food	Refrigerator (40 °F or below)	Freezer (0 °F or below)
Salads	Egg, chicken, ham, tuna & macaroni salads	3 to 5 days	Does not freeze well
Hot dogs	opened package	1 week	1 to 2 months
	unopened package	2 weeks	1 to 2 months
Luncheon meat	opened package or deli sliced	3 to 5 days	1 to 2 months
	unopened package	2 weeks	1 to 2 months
Bacon & Sausage	Bacon	7 days	1 month
	Sausage, raw — from chicken, turkey, pork, beef	1 to 2 days	1 to 2 months
Hamburger & Other Ground Meats	Hamburger, ground beef, turkey, veal, pork, lamb, & mixtures of them	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Fresh Beef, Veal, Lamb & Pork	Steaks	3 to 5 days	6 to 12 months
	Chops	3 to 5 days	4 to 6 months
	Roasts	3 to 5 days	4 to 12 months
Fresh Poultry	Chicken or turkey, whole	1 to 2 days	1 year
	Chicken or turkey, pieces	1 to 2 days	9 months
Soups & Stews	Vegetable or meat added	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 months
Leftovers	Cooked meat or poultry	3 to 4 days	2 to 6 months
	Chicken nuggets or patties	3 to 4 days	1 to 3 months
	Pizza	3 to 4 days	1 to 2 months