

EXTENSION CONNECTION – Handling Leftovers when Dining Out

By: Paulelda Gilbert, ISU Extension Nutrition & Health Specialist

Q. When I eat at restaurants, I typically am served more food than I can eat and like to take the left-overs home. How do I know when it is safe to do that?

A. After deciding what to order, there's one more important decision: how to handle leftovers. Leave your leftovers behind if you can't refrigerate or freeze them within two hours from time of service. Two hours is the maximum time perishable foods should be at room temperature. This includes the time they're on the table during your meal. Perishable foods include meat, poultry and seafood; dairy products; cooked pasta, rice and vegetables; and fresh, peeled or cut fruits and vegetables.

Key points in cooling hot leftovers include the following:

- » Refrigerate and cool leftovers in shallow containers. Limit food depth to 2 inches.
- » Protect hot leftovers from cross-contamination from other foods by storing them on the top shelf of the refrigerator. Cover them loosely so the food cools faster, and then cover them tightly once cold.
- » Cold leftovers such as salads and pies should be covered and refrigerated immediately.
- » Store packages of raw meat, poultry and seafood on the bottom shelf of your refrigerator so their juices don't drip onto leftovers or other foods.

Eat leftovers in one to two days or freeze them for longer storage. For best quality and safety, eat leftovers in a day or two. To keep them longer, freeze at 0 degrees. Frozen leftovers are safe indefinitely; however, most foods will have the best quality if used within two to four months.

Thaw frozen leftovers in the refrigerator or in your microwave. If food is thawed in the microwave, cook it right away. Unlike food thawed in a refrigerator, foods thawed in a microwave reach temperatures that encourage bacterial growth.

Reheat leftovers to 165 degrees until they're steaming hot throughout. At this temperature, harmful bacteria should be destroyed. Stir to promote even heating. If you reheat foods in your microwave, you need to reach 165 degrees as well.

When in doubt, toss leftovers out. Suppose you: 1) left your leftovers on the car seat overnight, 2)

let your leftovers sit more than a week in the refrigerator, or 3) forgot your frozen leftovers on the kitchen counter all day. Is there any way to know if they're still safe to eat? You cannot see or smell most bacteria that might make you sick. Tasting is risky and also won't tell you if a food is unsafe. That's why the advice most frequently given is when in doubt, throw it out.

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 576-2119 or e-mail pgilbert@iastate.edu, with your nutrition and health questions. You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804 or visit the Webster County Extension web site: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Pages/webster>.

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