

Plan A Good Defense For Safe Food At Tailgate Parties

Don't give bacteria a sporting chance at your football tailgate gathering. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reminds consumers that although tailgating is a cool weather activity in most areas of the country, it still requires the same safe food handling practices as summer picnicking. It takes a good defense to keep harmful food borne bacteria from sending guests to the locker room.

There's nothing more American than tailgating and football. Food and football have long been paired for fall festivities. In fact, "gridiron" -- the nickname for the football field -- comes from a grate used for grilling food. So this fall, if you'll be grilling your "pigskin," make sure you've got the right equipment to defeat bacteria. Keeping food safe at parties takes a team effort.

"No matter what team you're rooting for, make sure you plan a good defense for keeping food safe at tailgate parties," said Dr. Elsa A. Murano, USDA under secretary for food safety. "Following the four food safety steps will ensure all tailgaters enjoy safe food."

Throughout food preparation and serving, the Partnership for Food Safety Education's Fight BAC!® campaign advises to:

- **Clean.** Clean the food thermometer after use; use clean serving plates, utensils, etc.
- **Separate.** Separate raw meat and poultry from cooked foods to avoid cross-contamination.
- **Cook.** Raw meat and poultry need to be cooked thoroughly.
- **Chill.** Store leftovers in the cooler within 2 hours of taking food off of the grill. When the temperature is above 90 °F, store food in a cooler within 1 hour.

The Game Plan

Keeping food safe from home to stadium helps prevent food borne illness. The game plan should include packing for a situation where a refrigerator, stove, and running water are probably not available. Include lots of clean utensils, not only for eating but also for serving the safely cooked food. In addition to a grill and fuel for cooking food, pack a food thermometer to be sure the meat, poultry, and casseroles reach a high enough temperature to destroy harmful bacteria that may be present.

Keep hot food hot. If bringing hot take-out food, eat it within 2 hours of purchase. Or plan ahead and chill the food in your refrigerator before packing for your tailgate. To keep food like soup, chili, and stew hot, use an insulated container. Fill the container with boiling water, let it stand for a few minutes, empty, and then put in the piping hot food. Keep the insulated container closed to keep the food hot (140 ° F or above) for several hours.

Carry cold perishable food like raw hamburger patties, sausages, and chicken in an insulated cooler packed with several inches of ice, frozen gel packs, or containers of frozen water. Perishable cooked food such as luncheon meat, cooked meat, chicken, and potato or pasta salads must be kept refrigerator cold, too. When packing the cooler for an outing, be sure raw meat and poultry are wrapped securely to prevent their juices from cross-contaminating ready-to-eat food.

Find out if there's a source of potable (drinkable) water. If not, bring water for cleaning. Pack clean, wet, disposable cloths or moist towelettes and paper towels for cleaning hands and surfaces.

The Play-by-Play

At the tailgate party, it's important to keep hot food hot and cold food cold. Bacteria multiply rapidly between 40 °F and 140 °F. Never leave food in this "danger zone" more than 2 hours (1 hour when the outside temperature is above 90 °F). Cook meat and poultry completely. Partial cooking of food ahead of time allows bacteria to multiply to the point that subsequent cooking cannot destroy them.

Meat and poultry cooked on a grill often browns very fast on the outside, so check using a food thermometer to be sure they are cooked thoroughly. Cook hamburgers, sausage, and other ground meats (veal, lamb, and pork) to an internal temperature of 160 °F and ground poultry to 165 °F. Beef, veal and lamb steaks and roasts may be cooked to 145 °F for medium rare. Poultry breast meat should be cooked to 170 °F and dark meat to 180 °F. All cuts of pork should reach 160 °F.

The Wrap-Up

Some people have so much fun at tailgate gatherings, they never actually make it into the stadium to see the football game. But that doesn't mean it's safe for the food to stay unrefrigerated before, during, and after the game. Store food in the cooler except for brief times when serving. Cook only the amount of food that will be eaten to avoid the challenge of keeping leftovers at a safe temperature. Discard any leftovers that are not ice cold after the game. Food should not be left out of the cooler or off the grill more than 2 hours (1 hour when the outside temperature is above 90 °F). Holding food at an unsafe temperature is a prime cause of food borne illness.

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