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Test Your Safety Knowledge About Ready-to-Cook Foods

This simple quiz can help keep you healthy

The U.S. has one of the safest food supplies in the world, and eating nutritious foods is essential for good health.

But foods occasionally do become contaminated somewhere along the food-supply chain – on the farm or in the consumer's home, or anywhere in between. This can include ready-to-cook foods, too; foods like packaged cookie dough and frozen pizza, as just two examples of the many kinds that are available. Ready-to-cook foods are any foods whose packages or labels tell you to cook or bake them.

As with any food, a ready-to-cook food that has become contaminated with bacteria or other organisms that could make you sick might look and smell normal. Think along the lines of "just in case," and follow the important safety tips in this quick quiz.

True or False? If a ready-to-cook food is contaminated with bacteria that could make me sick, freezing will kill the bacteria.

False. Many kinds of bacteria can live even at freezing temperatures. If a frozen food contains enough bacteria that survive freezing, the food can make you sick, if you don't cook it at temperatures high enough to kill the bacteria before you eat it. Follow the cooking instructions on the package to make sure that the food reaches hot enough temperatures all the way through, including in the middle.

True or False? Some ready-to-cook foods were already partially cooked at the factory. This killed any bacteria that might have been present.

False. Partial cooking at the factory makes foods more convenient, but it wasn't necessarily done at temperatures high enough or for long enough to kill any bacteria that may have been present.

True or False? *Pasteurized* egg products can be used in eggnog.

True...but using raw, **un**pasteurized eggs can make you sick, because some might carry the bacterium *Salmonella* or other organisms. They should not be eaten raw in eggnog or any

other food or drink. If contaminated **un**pasteurized eggs are used in eggnog, don't count on the alcohol in the drink to kill all of the bacteria – that's not likely to happen.

But *pasteurized* eggs or egg products have been treated to kill bacteria. Look on the product's packaging; it will tell you if the product has been pasteurized.

Of course, **any** kind of food or drink that's supposed to be refrigerated can grow bacteria, whether or not it's pasteurized, if you don't keep it refrigerated according to the package instructions; for example, if you leave it at room temperature for more than two hours.

True or False? Microwaving will kill bacteria that might be present in ready-to-cook foods.

True...*if you follow the package instructions*. If the directions say that a ready-to-cook food should be cooked – not just warmed up – by microwave, be sure to use the power level and amount of time specified. Cover the dish, if the instructions tell you to.

If you don't follow the directions, the temperature might not get hot enough all the way through the food, including in the middle, to kill any bacteria that might have been present. In fact, if bacteria happen to be present and you just get the food very warm, instead of hot enough to kill the bacteria, it can actually cause the bacteria to multiply, raising the chance that the food will make you sick.

True or False? I need to wash my hands when handling ready-to-cook foods.

True. Wash your hands before and after handling any food. Not washing your hands can spread any bacteria that are present, either from the food to your hands and your surroundings or from your hands to the food.

True or False? These tips apply only to ready-to-cook foods.

False. The safety tips above apply to any food that's supposed to be cooked. They apply whether it's a ready-to-cook food (like frozen entrées or packaged cookie dough, among many others) or a raw food that you cook "from scratch."