

Food safety for 'Grey Nomads'

Tips for seniors who travel by motorhome, caravan, or campervan around Australia

This fact sheet has been provided by Food Safety Information Council as a community service.

You're free. Having fun travelling on the road, so don't let illness spoil your fun. Take the time to read this leaflet and think about how you are going to prepare food on the road. Follow the simple but effective hints suggested here, and food poisoning won't be an unwelcome hitchhiker in your motorhome, caravan or campervan.

Ageing increases our risk of food-borne illness, so older people need to take extra care when storing and preparing food on the road. Moreover, the consequences of the illness can be more severe if we do get it. When we go travelling in a motorhome, caravan or campervan, the risks of food poisoning increase because:

Refrigerated storage is limited because refrigerators are smaller.

High risk food may need to be kept longer because of long distances between shops.

There is less work space and equipment in the kitchen increasing the opportunity for cross-contamination from raw to ready to eat food.

Clean water for washing ingredients, utensils and hands may be in short supply or not available.

Keeping food out of the temperature danger zone

You probably have a three way fridge which can run off mains electricity, bottled gas or your car battery. If the temperature inside the fridge rises above 5 degrees Celsius, bacteria in the food can multiply and eventually make the food unsafe.

You almost certainly have a smaller fridge than at home. The amount of high risk food you can take with you will be limited by how much you can fit into this fridge without blocking air circulation which helps to maintain temperature.

If you carry frozen foods, thawing can become an issue. On one hand it is important that some foods, such as poultry, sausages, minced meats, etc. are completely thawed before being cooked to ensure that they are thoroughly cooked or sufficiently hot in the centre to kill any food poisoning bacteria that might be present. On the other hand there may not be sufficient space in the fridge to thaw them out under controlled conditions.

What you can do

Keep a thermometer in the fridge to allow you to monitor and adjust the temperature when needed. You can buy a fridge thermometer quite cheaply at kitchen shops.

Don't carry more perishable food than will comfortably fit in your fridge. If you are travelling between towns, only carry enough for a few days. Then stock up for another few days at the next town. Shopping in small towns is a great way to get to know the area too.

If your trip is 'off the beaten track', and you have enough freezer space, you can prepare pre-cooked frozen food at home to take with you or purchase commercially frozen meals. Take special care when preparing cooked food for freezing. Make sure that all work surfaces and utensils used are clean.

Refrigerate the food very soon after it finishes cooking - as soon as it stops steaming. Freeze in small containers or sealed bags - containing only enough for one meal to reduce left-overs. Remember to label and date the packages. Thaw your precooked food in a microwave or in the fridge - never on the benchtop. Alternatively, soups and stews can be heated from frozen in a saucepan. Whatever way you thaw the food, make sure that it is heated to steaming hot before it is eaten.

If you're travelling far from towns and their supermarkets, you can supplement your fresh foods with canned and dried products which can be safely stored outside the fridge. Make sure that you have access to enough safe water to re-hydrate any dried food e.g. powdered milk, which will not be thoroughly cooked before you eat it (see tips on safe water below). Once opened, dried foods should be kept in airtight containers to maintain their quality and to keep pests out.

Take the beer, jam and pickles out of the fridge if you're short of space. They are unlikely to cause food poisoning if they stay outside the fridge.

Raw meats can be thawed outside the fridge, but ready to eat foods should be thawed in the fridge or microwave.

When barbecuing

Cook poultry, minced meats, sausages and boned roasts right through to the centre. No pink should be left visible and the juices should run clear. Steaks and other solid pieces of meat can be cooked to taste. Have a clean plate and clean utensils ready to receive the cooked meat - don't use the same ones that were used for the raw meat.

It's OK to leave cooked meat to remain warm on a corner of the barbecue or covered on a plate. Just ensure it's protected from flies and don't leave it around for more than four hours (or two hours if you are then going to put leftovers back in the fridge). Cooking only enough meat for one meal is a safer option, and it saves storage space. If it is left out of the fridge for four hours or longer it could be unsafe and should be thrown out.

Work space and equipment

Cooking in motorhomes, caravans, campervans, etc tends to have one thing in common; you are preparing food under more cramped conditions. The workbench space is smaller than in your home, and you probably have less equipment, such as knives, storage containers etc with you. This can increase the risk of cross contamination.

Cross contamination happens when bacteria from raw food such as meat, poultry or dirty vegetables touch or drip on to ready to eat food (food which will not be cooked before eating) such as salad vegetables, bakery items or fruit. Bacteria on the raw food are killed when the food is cooked, but the ready to eat food is eaten without further cooking - bacteria and all.

Cross contamination is more likely in a motorhome or caravan than at home. If you have only one food preparation bench or chopping board or one sharp knife, bacteria can get onto these surfaces when you cut up the raw food (meat, poultry etc) as you prepare to cook it. If you use the same equipment, without washing it properly, for cutting up the salad vegetables or making a sandwich these bacteria can be transferred.

If the fridge is overcrowded, raw meat, chicken or fish are more likely to touch or drip onto ready to eat food and contaminate it with food poisoning bacteria. You can minimise this risk by always storing raw foods (meat etc) on the lowest shelf of the fridge, below ready to eat, fresh food.

Your hands can also help to transfer bacteria between foods.

What you can do

Always store raw meats and poultry on the lowest shelf of the fridge, below ready to eat fresh food. Make sure that the bench, chopping board and knife are carefully washed with warm water and detergent, then rinsed and thoroughly dried before you prepare ready to eat food. You should always treat raw foods as though they were contaminated.

If water is going to be in short supply you might need to double up on chopping boards and cutting knives.

Carry lots of leak-proof containers with you and use them for any raw food to prevent leaks onto other foods. Zip lock plastic bags can also do the job, provided they are properly sealed and have no holes. Make sure that you wash your hands and dry them thoroughly before beginning to prepare food and between handling raw and ready to eat food. If you are using toilets in an amenities block, remember to bring soap and towel with you as these are often not provided.

If water is scarce and you can't wash up immediately, place soiled dishes in a bucket and wash up with hot water at the first opportunity.

Safe water supply

If you are using an un-serviced site, remember, water, even in remote and pristine wilderness is not necessarily safe. It might look absolutely pristine but can be contaminated by animal faeces and naturally occurring parasites, such as Giardia. If the water tank in your motorhome or caravan is unsealed or if the water has not been regularly changed, it may have picked up contaminants and should be treated if used for drinking or washing ready to eat food.

What you can do

- You can use bottled water.
- You can boil water for at least one minute (a little longer if you are at high altitudes). Boiling water is the most efficient method of disinfection. Chemical methods may not kill some parasitic organisms.
- You can use chlorine and iodine water disinfecting tablets.
- You can use a portable water filter. Follow manufacturer's instructions on appropriate use.

Following the advice in this leaflet will help you to enjoy your trip and maximise the chance that your memories will not be marred by bouts of avoidable food borne illness. For safety's sake and to make sure that you do have a great holiday always remember the 6 key tips.....

1. Keep hot food steaming hot
2. Keep cold food refrigerated
3. Cook food properly
4. Separate raw and ready to eat foods
5. Keep kitchen and utensils clean
6. Wash hands with soap and dry thoroughly

Food Safety Information Council

The Food Safety Information Council is a non-profit group with representatives of State and Federal governments, food industry and professional associations. Membership is open to any organisation with an interest in promoting safe food handling practices for consumers.

We aim to reduce the over five million cases of food poisoning in Australia each year by educating consumers to handle food safely from the time it leaves the retailer until it appears on the plate.

We organise Food Safety Week each November as part of our campaign to pass on simple messages to improve consumers' knowledge of how to handle, store and cook food safely. **For more information**

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