

Using a Meat Thermometer

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More than 250 different diseases have been described that can be caused by consuming food or beverages contaminated with pathogenic bacteria, viruses or parasites. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 6.5 to 33 million cases of foodborne disease occur each year in the U.S. This means that anywhere from 2.5 to 13.3 percent of the U.S. population will experience a case of foodborne illness this year. About 70 percent of reported foodborne disease outbreaks have involved food from foodservice establishments, while 20 percent involved food prepared at home. The food processing industry is involved in less than 10 percent of all reported outbreaks. The foodhandler plays a very important role in the safety of food.

Every home should have a meat thermometer to reduce your risk of becoming sick with a foodborne disease. Raw foods of animal origin contain bacteria some of which may cause foodborne disease. A meat thermometer should be used every time you cook foods like poultry, roasts, hams, meat loaves and egg dishes. By measuring the internal temperature of meat and other foods, you will know that your food has reached a temperature that is sufficient to destroy certain pathogenic bacteria.

Several types of meat thermometers are available. Oven-proof meat thermometers can be inserted into meat at the beginning of the cooking time and remain in the meat as it is cooked. The temperature indicator will rise slowly as the meat cooks. Instant read and digital meat thermometers register product temperature within about 15 seconds, but cannot remain in the meat while the meat is cooked. Pop-up meat thermometers are commonly used in poultry. An indicator pops up when the meat has reached a specific internal temperature. Microwave safe meat thermometers are designed to be used only in microwave ovens. Whatever type of meat thermometer you obtain, be sure that it has an easy to read dial, is made with stainless steel and has a shatterproof clear lens.

Once you have obtained your meat thermometer, check the accuracy of the thermometer. This can be done by inserting at least two inches of the thermometer stem into an ice bath which is a combination of ice and water. Your thermometer should read 32°F. Or, insert two inches of the thermometer stem into boiling water. At sea level, your thermometer should read 212°F. If you live at higher altitudes, contact your local county extension office to find out the boiling temperature of water in your area. Most meat thermometers are accurate to within plus or minus one to two degrees Fahrenheit. Recalibrate your thermometer if necessary.

To measure the internal temperature of meat, insert the meat thermometer into the center of the thickest portion, away from bone, fat and gristle. All ground meat should be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 160°F. When cooking poultry, insert the thermometer into the inner thigh area near the breast, but not touching the bone. Be sure to wash the stem section of the thermometer with hot, soapy water after each use, including between reinsertion into the same piece of meat. For a list of recommended internal cooking temperatures for meat, contact your local county extension office.