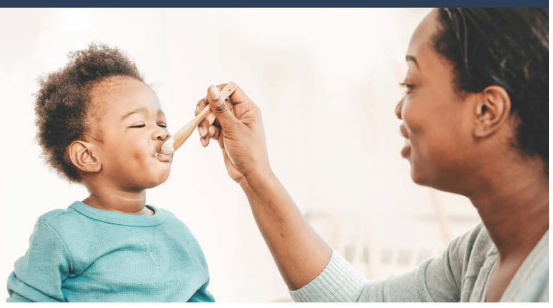
People at Risk: Children Under Five

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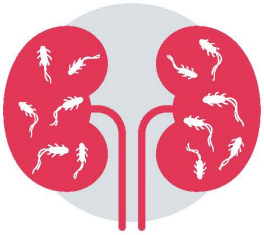
Food Safety for Children Under 5

Learn food safety steps to keep children under 5 safe from food poisoning.



Why are children under 5 at risk?

Young children have a higher risk of food poisoning. Their immune systems are still developing, so their bodies can't fight germs and sickness as well as adults. Food poisoning can be particularly dangerous for them because it can lead to diarrhea and dehydration.



Did you know?

15% of children under 5 years old with *E. coli* O157 develop hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS), a serious condition that can cause kidney failure and even death.

High-risk foods for children under 5:

- Unpasteurized (raw) milk or juice and all raw milk products
- Foods containing raw eggs and/or raw flour, such as raw cookie dough or batter
- Unwashed fruits and vegetables
- Raw or undercooked fish, meat, or poultry
- Raw or undercooked eggs

How long is baby food safe?

Solid foods (opened or freshly made)	Refrigerator	Freezer
Strained fruits and vegetables	2 to 3 days	6 to 8 months
Strained meats and eggs	1 day	1 to 2 months
Meat/vegetable combinations	1 to 2 days	1 to 2 months
Homemade baby foods	1 to 2 days	1 to 2 months



Use these 4 steps to food safety:

CLEAN hands and surfaces often

SEPARATE raw meat and poultry from ready-to-eat foods

COOK foods to a safe internal temperature

CHILL perishable foods within 2 hours

Provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are divisions of HHS. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is part of USDA.

For more food safety tips, visit FoodSafety.gov

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Children younger than five years are at an increased risk for foodborne illness and related health complications because their immune systems are still developing. Young children with developing immune systems cannot fight off infections as well as adults.

Foodborne illness (also called food poisoning) can be particularly dangerous for young children because it often causes vomiting or diarrhea or both. Since children's bodies are small, they can quickly lose a lot of body fluid and become dehydrated.

Food safety for young children depends on the food safety behaviors of their parents and caregivers. Handwashing is especially important. Children and those caring for them should wash hands often, especially before, during and after preparing food and before eating.

In children under 5 years old, *E. coli* infections are more likely to lead to hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS), a severe complication that can cause chronic kidney disease, kidney failure and death.

Symptoms of HUS are:

- Urinating (peeing) less often
- Having blood in the urine (pee)
- Feeling very tired or irritable
- Decreased awareness (alertness)
- Losing pink color in cheeks and inside the lower eyelids

These new symptoms usually develop after about a week of *E. coli* illness, when the diarrhea is improving.

Choose and Prepare Safe Food

Learn about safer food choices for people with a higher risk for foodborne illness, including young children. If you prepare food for children under the age of five, you should always follow these four steps:

Clean: Wash hands, utensils and surfaces often. Germs can spread and survive in many places.

Separate: Raw meat, poultry, seafood, poultry, and eggs can spread illness-causing bacteria to ready-to-eat foods, so keep them separate.

Cook: Food is safely cooked only when the internal temperature is high enough to kill germs that can make you sick. See the safe minimum cooking temperatures chart for how to safely prepare meat, seafood, chicken, and other foods.

Chill: Refrigerate perishable food promptly. Bacteria that cause food poisoning multiply quickest between 40°F (4°C) and 140°F (60°C).

Safe Storage of Puréed and Solid Baby Food

Purees and Solids (opened or freshly made)	Refrigerator	Freezer
Strained fruits and vegetables	2 to 3 days	6 to 8 months
Strained meats and eggs	1 day	1 to 2 months
Meat/vegetable combinations	1 to 2 days	1 to 2 months
Homemade baby foods	1 to 2 days	1 to 2 months

Safe Microwaving of Puréed and Solid Baby Foods

Follow these precautions when microwaving baby food:

- Don't microwave baby foods in the jar. Instead, transfer the food to a dish before microwaving it. This way the food can be stirred and taste-tested for temperature.
- Microwave four ounces of solid food in a dish for about 15 seconds on high power. Always stir, let stand 30 seconds, and taste-test before feeding. Food that's "baby-ready" should taste or feel lukewarm.
- Don't heat baby-food meats, meat sticks, or eggs in the microwave. Use the stovetop instead. These foods have a high fat content, and since microwaves heat fats faster than other substances, these foods can cause splattering and overheating.

Safe Preparation and Storage of Infant Formula

How to Prepare Formula

- Carefully read and follow the instructions on the infant formula container.
- Wash your hands well before preparing bottles or feeding your baby.
- Clean and sanitize the workspace where you will prepare the infant formula.
- Use clean, sanitized bottles. Learn how to clean, sanitize, and store infant feeding items.
- If you use powdered infant formula, use water from a safe source to mix it. If you are not sure if your tap water is safe to use for preparing infant formula, contact your local health department.
- Use the amount of water listed on the instructions of the infant formula container. Always measure the water first and then add the powder.
- If your baby is younger than 3 months old, was born prematurely, or has a weakened immune system, you may want to take extra precautions in preparing your infant's formula to protect against *Cronobacter*, a rare but serious infection that can be caused by germs in powdered infant formula.
- Use prepared infant formula within 2 hours of preparation and within 1 hour from when feeding begins.
- Throw away formula left in the bottle after feeding your baby.
- If you do not start to use prepared infant formula within 2 hours, immediately store the bottle in the fridge and use it within 24 hours.

Heating Breast Milk or Formula

Breasts milk and infant formula do not need to be warmed before feeding. If you do decide to warm the bottle, here is advice on how to warm it safely:

In Hot Tap Water: Place bottle under hot, running tap water until the bottle reaches the desired

temperature. This should take 1 to 2 minutes.

On the Stove: Heat water in a pan. Remove the pan from the heat and set the bottle in the hot water until the bottle is warm.

When heating a baby's bottle, always shake the liquid to even out the temperature and test the temperature by putting a few drops on your wrist before feeding. Milk that's "baby-ready" should feel lukewarm.

Never heat breast milk or infant formula in the microwave. Microwaves heat milk and infant formula unevenly, which results in hot spots that can burn a baby's mouth and throat.

Check out this guide to help you, grandparents, and caregivers keep your baby’s food safe: Once Baby Arrives, from Food Safety for Moms to Be.

Date Last Reviewed

August 11, 2026