Children can become sick with a foodborne illness if they eat food that has harmful bacteria growing in it. Controlling temperature is one of the most important ways that we control the growth of bacteria in food. The Temperature Danger Zone (40 °F to 140 °F) is the temperature range in which bacteria grow rapidly; therefore, it is important to limit the time foods spend in this zone.

Since child care providers serve a vulnerable population, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends following the consumer-based Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) guidelines on temperature control when storing, preparing, and serving food. Check with your sponsor, state agency, and local or state public health department for guidelines specific to your location.

**Food Storage**
Always cover, wrap, or seal food in containers for storage. Place a thermometer in the storeroom, refrigerator, and freezer where it can easily be seen to read and record temperatures.

**Storeroom**
Store dry food in a cool place, like a cabinet or storeroom. Store food at least 6 inches above the floor. The room temperature should stay between 50 °F and 70 °F.

**Refrigerator**
Store food in your refrigerator at 40 °F or below. Store raw meats on the lowest shelves. The juices from raw meat can drip onto another food and spread germs, which could cause foodborne illness.
Freezer
Store frozen foods at 0 °F or below.

Food Preparation
Thaw frozen food the safe way.
• Thaw in the refrigerator, maintaining the food temperature at 40 °F or below.
• Thaw completely submerged under cold, running water.
• Thaw as part of a cooking process.

Plan your food preparation so food is at room temperature for a very short time before it is refrigerated, cooked, or served.

Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Follow your state’s guidelines for food safety temperatures.
• Cold foods must be kept at 40 °F or below.
• Hot foods must be kept at 140 °F or above.

Use a metal-stem thermometer or digital thermometer to test the internal temperature of foods. For more information on using a food thermometer, see CARE Connection Food Safety Lesson, How to Use a Metal-Stem Thermometer.

Cooking foods to the correct internal temperature will destroy most bacteria, even though it may not kill toxins or bacterial spores. The USDA FSIS provides recommendations for cooking temperatures and times to destroy organisms of concern. Be sure to check what your local requirements are for temperatures. Here are some examples.
## Temperature and Time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperature</th>
<th>Products</th>
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| 140 °F      | • Ready-to-eat foods taken from a commercially processed, hermetically sealed package  
              • Fresh, frozen, or canned fruits and vegetables cooked for hot holding  
              • Cooked ham (reheating) |
| 145 °F      | • Fresh beef, veal, or lamb |
| 160 °F      | • Ground meat (including ground beef and sausage)  
              • Egg dishes  
              • Pork; fresh (uncooked) ham |
| 165 °F      | • Poultry, stuffing,  
              • Casseroles  
              • Leftovers |

## Food Service

At mealtime, use common sense.

- For best quality, prepare foods close to serving and do not hold hot foods for long periods of time.
- Let hot food cool slightly before serving the children so that it does not burn the child’s mouth.
- Do not hold hot foods too long before serving.
- Keep cold foods in the refrigerator until just before serving.

Food left in the temperature danger zone for more than 2 hours can cause illness. Throw away any food left out that long.

Remember the old saying, “When in doubt, throw it out.”
Leftovers
Cooling
Cool leftover hot foods quickly to keep them safe. Use these practices to cool hot food.
• Use shallow pans no more than 2 inches deep.
• For large pots of hot food, transfer the hot food into several shallow pans. Never refrigerate hot foods in large, deep containers because the food in the center will stay warm longer, giving bacteria more opportunity to grow.
• Stir often.
• Cut food into small pieces to speed cooling.
• Place shallow pan in a second pan with ice in the bottom of the second pan.
• Check temperature.
• Cover tightly when the food has cooled to 40 °F or below.

Storing
Refrigerate leftover food in shallow, air-tight containers. Label the container with the name of the food and the date the food was stored. Discard if not used within four days. Leftovers can be safely stored in the freezer at 0 °F for up to four months without quality problems.

Do not mix leftovers with freshly made food.

Store unused baby food in the original jar, labeled with the date opened and covered tightly, in the refrigerator. Never feed an infant baby food directly from the baby food jar. Place the appropriate serving in a dish and feed
the infant from the dish. Throw away any baby food left in dishes.

**Serving**
Serve leftovers as soon as possible. Do not serve leftovers after four days in the refrigerator.

Cooked leftovers must be reheated until the internal temperature is 165 °F.

After a leftover food has been reheated and served, throw away any food not eaten the second time.

Remember to check with your sponsor, state agency, and local or state public health department for the current food safety guidance that you must follow.

**Sources:**