



Consumer Focus

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Independence Day drills for the grill

Many of us celebrate the Fourth of July with a day of outdoor activities and tasty meats from the grill. The chef of your household might have the skills to cook the perfect burger, but do they know the food safety “drills of the grill?” The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is providing food safety recommendations for outdoor cooking celebrations that typically mark the holiday weekend.

Safety always important

“Safe food handling is always important,” FSIS Administrator Alfred Almanza says, “but during the warm summer months — peak grilling season — there is an increased need for awareness of safe food handling practices.”

As the mercury rises in thermometers during the summer, so do cases of foodborne illness. This makes summer the ideal time to “grill” the food safety experts from USDA’s FSIS about cooking and handling foods safely to avoid foodborne illness. FSIS offers advice to consumers with questions about safe handling and preparation of meat and poultry products, including the five foods grilled most often: hamburgers, steak, chicken, hot dogs and ribs. Here’s advice for smoking and grilling food safely.

Smoking and grilling food safely

Smoking is a process of slowly cooking food indirectly near a fire. “Indirectly” means that the meat is not placed directly over the heat source but over a drip pan of water placed underneath the meat on the grill. Steam from the water helps destroy harmful bacteria that can cause foodborne illness. A covered grill and a drip pan can also be used for smoking food.

To ensure meat and poultry are smoked safely, two types of thermometers are needed: one for the food and one for the smoker. Many smokers have built-in thermometers. A thermometer is needed to monitor the air temperature in the smoker or grill to be sure the heat stays between 225° and 300° F throughout the cooking process. It’s important to keep the air hot enough to destroy bacteria as the meat cooks.

When using a charcoal-fired smoker, use commercial charcoal briquettes or aromatic wood chips. Place the smoker in a well-lit, well-ventilated area away from trees, shrubbery, and buildings. Only use approved fire starters — never gasoline or paint thinner, for example.

Meat for grilling is placed on a grate directly over the fire. The best cuts to grill are relatively thin cuts of meat or poultry: chicken parts, burgers, and steaks. Because grills cook food directly over high heat, tender cuts grill best. Unless the grill is being used as a smoker, the lid should stay open.



Use a food thermometer when grilling or smoking food

Use a food thermometer to determine the temperature of the meat or poultry. Oven-safe thermometers can be inserted in the meat and remain there during smoking. Use an instant-read thermometer after the meat is removed from the smoker.

Cooking time depends on many factors: the type and cut of meat, its size and shape, the distance of food from the heat, the temperature of the coals, and the weather. It can take anywhere from 4 to 8 hours to smoke meat or poultry, so it’s imperative to use thermometers to monitor temperatures.

Cook food to a safe minimum internal temperature:

- Beef, veal and lamb steaks, roasts, and chops may be cooked to 145° F.
- All cuts of pork to 160° F.
- Ground beef, veal and lamb to 160° F.
- All poultry should reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165° F.

More food safety tips

In addition to being food safe using a grill or smoker, follow these food handling tips to keep your cookout safe:

- Thaw meat and poultry before smoking it.
- Never defrost food at room temperature.
- Use the microwave oven for rapid thawing, but smoke or grill the meat immediately because some areas may begin to cook during the defrosting.
- Always marinate food in the refrigerator, not on the counter.
- When taking food off the grill, use a clean platter. Don’t put cooked food on the same platter that held raw meat or poultry. Any harmful bacteria present in the raw meat juices could contaminate safely cooked food.
- Refrigerate any leftovers promptly in shallow containers. Discard any food left out more than 2 hours (1 hour if temperatures are above 90° F).

For more information on smoking and barbecuing, go to www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Barbecue_Food_Safety/index.asp and www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Smoking_Meat_and_Poultry/index.asp.

