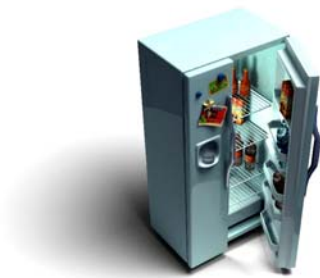


Safety Fact Sheet

Cleaning Up the Office Refrigerator



Horror stories abound about office refrigerators!

Here are a few chilling tales:

- Human stool samples stored in the same refrigerator as employee lunches.
- Cow manure samples refrigerated next to food items.
- Over 30 people at one company became sick because leftover food in a deep container didn't cool fast enough. Bacteria in the food multiplied to a level that caused illness when the food was served again.
- Sandwiches put out for a staff in the company break room left out too long. Over a dozen people became ill.
- Foods with expiration dates 2 years and older found in refrigerators. A sack lunch of an employee who left the company several months ago remained.

Tales of fuzzy and fermented foods are common. One refrigerator magnet summed up the situation, "If a messy kitchen is a happy kitchen, this place is delicious."

Refrigerator Food Safety Quiz

Many offices find it helpful to have an office refrigerator policy. Before developing such a policy, some knowledge about keeping food safely refrigerated might be helpful. Here's a quiz to test your refrigerator food safety savvy. At the end are some tips for developing, implementing and maintaining an office refrigerator policy.

Test Your Refrigerator Food Safety Savvy Quiz

Answer YES or NO to the following questions:

1. Is it safe to leave perishable foods at room temperature for longer than TWO hours TOTAL time? (Perishable foods include: meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, cooked pasta, rice and vegetables, fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables).
2. Is it OK to refrigerate foods while they're still warm?
3. Should you eat refrigerated leftovers within a day or two for safety and quality?
4. Should you keep your refrigerator at 40 degrees or lower?
5. Can you always see, smell or taste bacteria that cause food-borne illness?

Answers



1. NO. Refrigerate perishable foods so the TOTAL time they're at room temperature is less than 2 hours. At room temperature just ONE bacterium in these foods could grow to 2,097,152 in 7 hours.
2. YES. Just leave the container cover slightly cracked until the food has cooled. Refrigerate foods in shallow containers to speed cooling.
3. YES. Eat refrigerated leftovers promptly.
4. YES. Keeping your refrigerator at 40°F or lower slows bacterial growth. Keep your freezer at 0°F or lower, which stops most bacterial growth. Freezing **does not** kill bacteria. Keep an appliance thermometer in your refrigerator and in your freezer to assure they stay at these recommended temperatures.
5. NO. When in doubt, toss it out! You can't always see, smell or taste bacteria that cause food-borne illness. It takes from ½ hour to 6 weeks before you get sick from contaminated food.

Some Possible Office Refrigerator Policies

A request for office refrigerator policies sent to several internet food-related lists servers yielded similar responses from throughout the country. Here's a summary of the types of statements and recommendations received:

- This refrigerator is meant to be used as a place to store employee meals (ONE day at a time). Those who store additional days' worth of food make it difficult for others to find room in the refrigerator for their lunches. At the end of each day the refrigerator should be empty of all staff meals. It is strongly advised people label ALL ITEMS they put in the refrigerator. **Suggestion:** Keep some type of marking pen/tape in the break room for people to use in labeling their food. This helps track down owners of unclaimed reusable food containers.
- Any perishable item meant to be shared with staff should be labeled "For Staff." It also should be labeled with the date it was refrigerated and the name of the person responsible for it. Anything not eaten by the third day will be thrown away – no questions asked. Perishable foods include: meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, cooked pasta, rice and vegetables, fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables.
- If you put things in the break room to be shared, make sure you use safe food procedures. For example, no perishable food (such as meat sandwiches) should be left at room temperature for over 2 hours. This includes the original time it was set out for serving. Refrigerate perishable food in SHALLOW containers. Rather than leave perishable foods on the break room table or counter, one person suggested the food be refrigerated and a note left in plain sight instead. The note might say: Help yourself to the turkey and roast beef sandwiches in the refrigerator.
- "For staff" foods such as ice cream, ice cream toppings, condiments, etc. should be labeled with a date. They will be thrown away periodically, based on their "use by" date, a food safety storage chart or general appearance. Another example of refrigerator magnet wisdom on identifying foods to be tossed: "If it walks out, let it go!"

- Each day (give specific day – frequently Friday is listed) anything left in the refrigerator will be thrown away by (give time here).
- If you spill something in the refrigerator, clean it up.
- Thinking beyond the break room, an entomologist advised that office workers toss food items ONLY into trash cans that are emptied DAILY. Letting food and food containers sit in trash cans for several days may cause problems with pests, bacteria and odors.

Implementing and Reinforcing a Refrigerator Policy

Here are some strategies various offices have used for keeping the office refrigerator clean (or at least, cleaner!).

- Develop a policy with input from staff and circulate for additions, modifications, etc. before drawing up the final policy. Give a due date by which feedback must be returned to be considered for the policy.
- Inform staff the day a refrigerator policy will begin.
- Post the policy on the refrigerator, break room bulletin board, office intranet, in an office policy and procedure manual and/or other place readily accessible by staff.
- As you begin to implement a policy, send out reminders that food will be tossed by a specific date/time unless labeled. Be prepared to modify the policy as new situations arise that were not expected when the policy was devised.
- Initially, it may seem wasteful to toss unclaimed food, but consider the following:
 - Unsafe “mystery” food (no name/no date), that is taken from the refrigerator and offered to others, may make people sick.
 - More money is lost when food is left in the refrigerator to spoil than if people learn to eat it in a timely manner.
 - When a refrigerator is filled with unsafe foods, there’s a possibility an unsafe food will contaminate other foods, especially if foods are squeezed together to fit everything into the refrigerator.

- FOLLOW THROUGH on tossing any unlabeled food on clean-out-the-refrigerator day.
- Assign someone accountable for cleaning food out of the refrigerator once a week. Some companies rotate this among divisions. Some rotate it among staff and have them sign off on a sheet near the refrigerator; people are responsible for finding a substitute if they'll be gone on the day they clean the refrigerator.
- Throw in some humor whenever possible. One office typically sent out an e-mail of "Food in Kitchen" when there was something to share on the communal counter. One day the message header was "Brew in the Kitchen". Having gotten people's attention, the sender went on to describe the "brew of bacteria" that was "fermenting, bubbling, replicating, growing and generally looking forward to finding a good home in someone's gut." She described some of the ailments that could occur from food-borne illness, and ended with some positive suggestions for safe food handling.
- Don't forget -- it's important to periodically clean the INTERIOR of the refrigerator.

– Source: *Food Reflections E-mail Newsletter; University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County*