

Is Your Kitchen Trying to Kill You?

For most of us, the kitchen is the heart of our home. It's a gathering spot for family and friends, a place where meals and memories are made.

Could this cozy scene be chock full of health hazards?

Think about it. Did your condiments expire in 2017? Do you sip your morning java from a chipped mug? Is a science project growing in the back of your fridge? Do you use the same knife to slice raw chicken and peppers for your fajitas? These kitchen culprits can make you sick. Every year, [one in six people](#) in the U.S. become ill from eating contaminated food.



As Executive Sous Chef for the University of Miami Health System, I work alongside Executive Chef Gustavo Perez. Together, we prepare 5,000-7,500 meals daily for employees and patients throughout the entire UHealth system.

Hidden kitchen hazards

Cutting boards, knives, slicers, can openers, and gaskets can potentially store bacteria if you don't clean them properly - and regularly. Wash your kitchen equipment in a dishwasher or with hot, soapy water if a dishwasher isn't available. Keep your countertops clean, too.

Always [wash your hands](#) with soap and water before preparing food (and after handling raw meats). Finally, swap out that dirty kitchen rag or sponge with a fresh replacement.

I prefer bamboo cutting boards over plastic in a home setting. They are somewhat easier to maintain and clean. In a large hospital or restaurant kitchen, plastic cutting boards are more common due to the volume of cutting boards in use at all times. If you prefer plastic at home, here's a system to minimize the spread of bacteria in your kitchen: plastic cutting boards are available in multiple colors to help prevent cross-contamination - green for produce, red for beef and pork, yellow for poultry, and white for ready-to-eat foods.

In the process of inspecting your kitchen, check out your dishes and mugs. Chips and/or hairline cracks definitely increase the likelihood of harboring bacteria or leaching chemicals - and can cause unnecessary injuries. The best plan of action is to discard all broken items.

Another easy safety precaution is wearing gloves (hot mitts) and aprons. Both protect you from burns, if properly fitted.

Raw food precautions

Raw chicken's reputation as a carrier of Salmonella and other bacteria is well known. However, I advise against rinsing raw chicken because it increases the

possibility of cross-contamination. Keep raw poultry away from other ingredients. Use a separate knife and cutting board when preparing meals. Do the same when handling raw beef, pork, eggs, and seafood. In the grocery store, separate these foods to prevent juices from contaminating other items.

When evaluating your kitchen equipment, consider buying a digital meat thermometer. A simple internal temperature check prevents many [foodborne illnesses](#). (Review this [chart](#) for safe cooked temperatures.)

Is it time to toss this?

I also suggest that people review their condiment expiration dates on a weekly basis. It is crucial to use the First In-First Out method, sometimes called FIFO, throughout your kitchen to ensure proper food rotation. If a food product will expire soon, place it at the front of your refrigerator or shelf so it can be used before a product with a later expiration date. While you are cleaning out your fridge, make sure it's cooling properly. The temperature should be below 40 degrees. And, in the course of your kitchen cleanup, don't forget expired spices. These generally don't pose a health hazard, but the flavor of your foods won't be up to par. Then, every few months, inventory your spices to ensure you are getting the best freshness.

In the daily routine of meal prep, it's easy to overlook food safety. Don't assume that just because a food looks and smells okay, it is safe to eat.

Combat this by:

- Checking expiration dates
- Cooking hot foods to the correct internal temperatures
- Keeping cold food refrigerated to avoid bacteria growth
- Avoiding cross-contamination

Safety is a huge priority in the kitchen. Whether you're preparing food for patients, restaurant patrons or your family, follow safety and sanitation protocols to provide the highest quality meals.



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READ MORE: [Food Poisoning is the Worst. Here's How to Avoid it](#)