



FOOD

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

# Stacking Food Safely in the Fridge

## Safeguarding Townsville's Environmental Health

Stacking your fridge correctly and keeping food at a safe temperature is very important especially in the tropics. Poor temperature control or cross-contamination can lead to serious health risks including food poisoning.

Using your fridge to keep food and drink cold is pretty obvious, but there are some basic risks you need to avoid to keep you and your family safe.

Maintaining the correct temperature inside your fridge is critical, as is storing different foods in different parts of the fridge depending on their reactions to different temperatures. Cross contamination between foods can be dangerous but is easy to avoid with a few simple precautions.

### SAFE FRIDGE TEMPERATURES >>

To keep food safe in fridge (and help keep it longer), the temperature should always be less than 5°C. The range between 5°C and 60°C is called the "danger zone" - when food can most quickly become contaminated and unsafe to eat.

Setting your fridge below 5°C is easy – just set the thermostat. A fridge thermometer mounted below the top shelf near the door will give you a good idea of your fridge's overall temperature.

But you also need to take into account the temperature range inside your fridge to be even safer because your fridge may vary in temperature by several degrees in different parts.

### TEMPERATURE VARIATION >>

Temperature varies for several reasons.

Hot air rises, making the top shelf the warmest spot in the fridge – good for fruit, vegetables and less perishable items. Because cold air settles, the bottom shelf is generally the coldest place in the fridge and is ideal for storing meats, fish and poultry.

Opening your fridge door allows cold air to escape, raising the temperature in your fridge and increasing the likelihood of bacteria multiplying and forming dangerous toxins.

Don't put too much food in the refrigerator. If there is no space between items, air cannot circulate properly, reducing proper cooling.

### STACKING YOUR FRIDGE SAFELY >>

There are a few simple things you can do to make your fridge run better and keep food safer:

- Minimise the amount of time the door is open by placing regularly used foods towards the top and front of the fridge for easy access.
- Never overload the fridge to the point that items are pushed up against each other.



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- Regularly check the temperatures of stored food to ensure your fridge is working at the right temperature by using a probe thermometer.
- Store meat, poultry, seafood and dairy products in the coldest part of the fridge (the back of the bottom shelf away from the door is the best bet).
- Keep dry storage areas, like the fruit and vegetable crisper, cool and dry. The ideal temperature to keep these fresh is between 10°C and 21°C, so the top of the fridge at the front is perfect.
- If you wash fruit and vegies before storing in the fridge, dry them first as the extra moisture will cause them to deteriorate faster.
- Stack new items behind older products. This will help ensure the older items are used sooner. Clearly mark individual items with their use by dates.
- Always cool hot foods in the fridge, but be aware they will warm the entire fridge and may raise surrounding food into the temperature danger zone.
- To be safe, place hot food as far away from other food as possible, ensure juices can't drip onto other food, drop the fridge temperature and leave the door closed for as long as possible to aid in cooling.

### **CROSS-CONTAMINATION >>**

Cross contamination occurs when bacteria or viruses are transferred from a contaminated item to something else and may cause a number of extremely serious health problems.

Cross contamination can easily occur in your fridge especially if you incorrectly store raw food like meat, poultry, seafood and dairy products.

The risk comes from either juices from raw foods dripping into other items, or from raw foods coming into direct contact with cooked foods, fruit and other ready to eat food.

Always avoid raw and cooked foods touching by keeping them separated in the fridge and by sealing raw foods to make sure juices

don't leak out. Placing these items on the bottom shelf also helps stop juices from dripping onto other foods.

### **“DANGEROUS” FOODS >>**

If handled and stored correctly, no food is dangerous in itself, but some items may pose a greater risk if mishandled.

Foods like meat, poultry and seafood should always be handled with care as these products spoil quickly and cross-contaminate other food if not kept at an appropriate temperature on an appropriate shelf.

Always place these products in separate containers, firmly sealed with air-proof covers, and stored at the bottom of the fridge.

### **OTHER IMPORTANT FRIDGE TIPS >>**

Regularly defrost your refrigerator within the manufacturer's guidelines. Using warm water with a little vinegar will help to remove odours and disinfect surfaces.

Fridges should always be kept clean and tidy and their contents regularly checked.

If left in the fridge for longer than appropriate, any food may become unfit for consumption. A simple rule is not to eat anything that looks or smells unusual. But remember pathogenic micro organisms may be present without the food looking or smelling bad.

Observe best-before or use-by dates on foods and if in doubt, throw it out!

### **FURTHER INFORMATION >>**

Contact Council on 1300 878 001 or visit Council's website at <http://www.townsville.qld.gov.au>.

**Your Council is committed to encouraging responsible environmental health practice to benefit the entire community.**

**Please be a considerate and responsible resident.**