Every year, one in six Americans will fall ill due to some form of food poisoning. Many times it's the result of not cooking food to the correct temperature. In fact, bacteria can multiply the quickest when food is between 40° F and 140° F. Follow these four simple steps when preparing food to keep you and your family safe.

1. Read and Follow Package Cooking Instructions.

2. Know When to Use a Microwave or Conventional Oven.

3. Know Your Microwave Wattage Before Microwaving Food.

4. Always use a Food Thermometer to Ensure a Safe Internal Temperature.

The following organizations support this public education effort:

AHAM ASSOCIATION OF HOME APPLIANCE MANUFACTURERS

AMERICAN FROZEN FOOD INSTITUTE

FDA

IMPI INTERNATIONAL MICROWAVE POWER INSTITUTE

NATIONAL CHICKEN COUNCIL

NATIONAL Turkey FEDERATION

PARTNERSHIP FOR FOOD SAFETY EDUCATION

USDA

The four basics of the "Cook It Safe" campaign are guidelines that emerged from "Consumer Guidelines for the Safe Cooking of Poultry Products," a report of the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods (NACMCF). NACMCF's purpose is to provide impartial, scientific advice to federal food safety agencies for use in the development of an integrated, national food safety system from farm to final consumption.

When It Comes to Convenience Food, Remember to

Cook It Safe!

1 Read and Follow Package Cooking Instructions.

When you're hungry and want to eat something fast, it's easy to grab a prepared convenience meal and zap it in the microwave without taking time to read the cooking instructions. Because these commercially prepared convenience foods can be purchased refrigerated, frozen, or off the shelf, it's important to carefully read and follow package cooking instructions. Most prepared convenience foods are not ready to eat right out of the container. Reading the product label should tell you if it's ready to eat. The label may state, for example, that the product contains uncooked ingredients and must be cooked in a conventional oven thoroughly.

Unfortunately, not following package cooking instructions can result in undercooked food, which can lead to foodborne illness because it's not cooked to a high enough temperature to kill bacteria that might be present.

2 Know When to Use a Microwave or Conventional Oven.

Sometimes proper cooking requires the use of a conventional oven, not a microwave. The instructions may call for cooking in a conventional oven, convection oven or toaster oven. Package cooking instructions are calibrated for a specific type of appliance and may not be applicable to all ovens. Additionally, some prepared convenience foods are shaped irregularly or are thicker in some areas, creating opportunities for cold spots or uneven cooking in a microwave oven, where harmful bacteria can survive. For this reason, it is important to use the appliance recommended on the label.

After cooking in any type of appliance, always use a food thermometer to be sure the product has reached the recommended safe internal temperature to destroy pathogens that cause foodborne illness.

3 Know Your Microwave Wattage Before Microwaving Food.

If your microwave's wattage is lower than the wattage mentioned in the cooking instructions on the food package, it will take longer than the instructions say to cook the food to a safe internal temperature. The higher the wattage of a microwave oven, the faster it will cook food. If you don't know the wattage of your microwave oven, see if it's stated on the inside of the oven's door, on the serial number plate on the back of the oven, or in the owner's manual.

4 Always Use a Food Thermometer to Ensure a Safe Internal Temperature.

After the microwave or conventional oven cooking time is completed, observe the "stand time" as specified in the cooking instructions. Stand time is the time after the food is removed from the heat source, but the food continues to cook. You can't tell if your food is properly cooked simply by its color and texture alone. Use a food thermometer to test the food in several places to make sure it has reached a safe internal temperature. Digital thermometers are best to use because they are accurate and respond quickly to temperature changes.

Additional Resources

For additional information on safe cooking temperatures and guidelines as well as microwave cooking safety, visit:

- USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service
  www.fsis.usda.gov
- Food and Drug Administration
  www.fda.gov/food
- Department of Health and Human Services
  www.foodsafety.gov
- Partnership for Food Safety Education
  http://fightbac.org/cookitsafe

Or, if you still have questions, you can "Ask Karen," the Food Safety and Inspection Services's virtual representative available 24 hours a day at www.AskKaren.gov.

BY PHONE:
Call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline
(1-888-674-6854)

or the FDA Food Information Line at
1-888-SAFE FOOD
(1-888-723-3366).

These year-round, toll-free hotlines are available Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern Time. An extensive selection of timely food safety messages is also available at these numbers, 24 hours a day.