



Do Meat and Cheese Really Need to be Refrigerated?

It can be confusing which items need to be refrigerated and which don't. Some types of meat and cheese need to be refrigerated to ensure safety.

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The answer to this question is, “It’s complicated!” When serving food to guests, family, or even preparing food for yourself, it is important to make sure that the food will not make anyone sick. One easy thing that can be done to prevent illness is to store food at the proper temperature. Examples of foods that require refrigeration include meat, cut melons,

poultry, eggs, seafood, dairy foods, cooked vegetables like baked potatoes, cooked rice or beans, cut tomatoes, leafy greens, and sprouts. These foods should be stored at 40°F or lower. Bacteria, also known as germs or “bugs,” grow anywhere between 40°-140°F and grow even faster at room temperature. When food is exposed to these temperatures, disease-causing bacteria can begin to grow and make someone sick when the food is consumed.

Some types of cheese and meat products require refrigeration and others do not. Some cheeses and meats have a low moisture content, higher level of acid, have

been smoked, or contain ingredients that help control bacterial growth. For those reasons, consumers can find items like Parmesan cheese or packages of salami at room temperature in the grocery store.

However, other softer and semi-soft cheeses and meats such as lunchmeat and ring bologna need to be refrigerated to prevent disease-causing bacteria from growing. Some people make statements like, “The cheese was already fermented, so it is ok to sit out.” or “The cheese tastes better at room temperature.” Cheese can be formed by the addition of enzymes to milk or when specific bacteria grow in milk and produce acid which coagulates the protein. So, while bacteria may be used in the cheese production process, the concern is that harmful bacteria can be introduced from a dirty cutting surface, knife, storage container, and your hands when the cheese is being sliced. Always read the label and follow the package instructions for storage.

If you are serving meat and cheese as part of a sandwich tray or a cheese board, keep temperature control in mind. Serve small batches of food to minimize the time it spends at room temperature. You may remove cheese from the refrigerator before serving so that it can warm, but put leftovers in the refrigerator after two hours and after just one hour if you are serving food outside and the temperature is above 90°F. You also want to minimize contamination when food is being served. Provide clean tongs or individual toothpicks rather than guests handling food with their bare hands.

If you aren't sure whether a meat or cheese product needs to be refrigerated, err on the side of caution and refrigerate it, especially if you are serving young children, elderly, or immunocompromised individuals. Be sure to use clean knives, cutting boards, and serving trays and to wash your hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before handling food. As always, you can contact your local Penn State Extension office with food safety questions.