

America's Love of Leftovers Demands Safe "Reheat & Eat-Iquette"

CHICAGO (May 5, 2004) -- Today's popular cooking trend is yesterday's news — or yesterday's dinner, that is. While leftover food may get a bad rap, a new survey conducted by the American Dietetic Association reveals that most Americans are still hungrily wrapping it up...and serving it again.

According to the survey, which was conducted on behalf of the ADA *Home Food Safety® It's in Your Hands®* program, nine out of 10 Americans eat leftovers at least once or twice a week, while nearly 20 percent enjoy repeat feasts three to five times a week. One in three (33 percent) belong to the "leftover lunch bunch," toting last night's dinner to work at least one to two times a week for a reheat-and-eat lunch.

And "leftovers" are more than just another round of Mom's tuna casserole. These days, consumers have expanded the repertoire of leftovers they're serving to include restaurant doggie bags and supermarket take-out, as well. According to the survey, nearly 20 percent of Americans are purchasing take-out more often today than they were just one year ago. More than half (52 percent) dine on restaurant take-out or doggie bag leftovers at least once a week, and another one in four opts for supermarket take-out one to two times a week.

Whether it's supermarket take-out, restaurant delivery or a meal prepared at home, heating and reheating really is the new cooking. To make sure leftovers are safe and delicious a second or even third time around, people need to keep in mind home food safety tips as they relate to this type of cooking and eating trend.

Rules of Reheating

When it comes to properly reheating encore entrées, the majority of repeater-eaters take shortcuts that can lead to foodborne illness. Survey results show most people (89 percent) do not consistently use a meat thermometer to ensure leftovers are completely heated — nor do they know the proper internal temperature to which leftovers should be heated, instead relying on their senses to estimate doneness. Nearly half say they reheat food until it "tastes hot" (48 percent), while 37 percent rely on food to "feel hot." Another seven percent wait for food to "look cooked" before digging in.

Whether you're microwaving leftovers or reheating them in the oven, the only accurate way to gauge the doneness of food is to use a meat thermometer to make sure foods reach a safe internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit. And adults aren't the only ones who should take heed of heat-and-eat tips. According to the ADA survey, 32 percent of parents say their children occasionally reheat leftovers on their own.

With kids taking on more responsibility in the kitchen, it's increasingly important for parents to be 'reheater role models' and practice proper food safety techniques at home.

Must-dos for Multiple Meals

According to the ADA survey, four out of five Americans say eating dinner together at home helps their family feel connected to one another. Yet for more than a third

of us, keeping up with the family's busy schedule often requires preparing one meal and reheating it later in the evening.

With today's hectic lifestyles, the so-called dinner 'hour' often extends well into the night to accommodate everyone's different arrival times — which can require heating and reheating leftovers sometimes even two or three times. When saving leftovers for late-comers, remember that perishable foods should never sit at room temperature for longer than two hours. Instead of leaving dinner on the stove between reheatings, store it in the fridge until family members are ready to eat.

For families that do find time for a meal together, choosing a menu that pleases every palate presents another challenge. In fact, four out of five Americans say they typically prepare separate dishes for the adults and children in their family.

When preparing multiple meals, remember to use different cutting boards and utensils for raw and ready-to-eat foods to help prevent cross-contamination — a leading cause of foodborne illness. Also, remember to wash hands in warm, soapy water before, during and after handling foods.

Quick Clues for Combination Cooks

Variety is the spice of life! For some home cooks, dinner is a smorgasbord of newly prepared dishes, restaurant or supermarket take-out and reheated leftovers. According to the survey, three out of four of these "combination cooks" typically serve leftover food as a complement to freshly prepared main dishes or sides. Another 45 percent tantalize taste buds by pairing up leftovers with restaurant or supermarket take-out.

Extend the life of leftovers from one smorgasbord to the next by making sure foods are properly refrigerated after every meal. Store leftovers in shallow containers (no more than two inches deep) to ensure rapid, even cooling, and always keep the refrigerator set below 40 degrees Fahrenheit to keep bacteria at bay.

Downloadable Refrigerator Calculator

"Is this stuff still good?" Remembering how long leftovers have been in the refrigerator is a problem most of us face nearly everyday — and miscalculating this information can be an equation for food poisoning! Take the guesswork out of your leftovers with a free, downloadable Refrigerator Calculator from www.homefoodsafety.org. The printer-friendly chart lists popular leftovers along with each food's recommended shelf-life. Post it on your refrigerator door as a helpful reminder — so you know when it's safe to dig in — and when it's better to throw out!

With approximately 65,000 members, the American Dietetic Association is the nation's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. ADA serves the public by promoting optimal nutrition, health and well-being. To locate a registered dietitian in your area, visit the American Dietetic Association at www.eatright.org.

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**Impulse Research Corporation conducted the home food safety survey in August 2002 for the American Dietetic Association through an online survey of 1,011 men and women age 20 and older with a margin of error of + 3%*

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