

Meigs Health Matters: Food Safety While Eating Out

Eating out at your favorite local restaurant with friends and family or while on vacation can be fun. You don't have to come up with an idea for dinner and to top it off, there's no mess left in the kitchen. But, nothing ruins a good evening and meal like a food service operation that is not following good food safety and sanitation practices.

Most restaurants and food service operations value you and your health, and they work very hard to prepare tasty and safe foods, but sometimes restaurants can fall short when using safe food handling practices. One accident can have the potential to lead to illness or injury, which is why we try to ensure food service operations and retail food establishments are preparing your food safely. The local health departments do this by conducting routine food inspections of food operations within their jurisdictions. Depending on the risk level of the operation, they will get one or two inspections per licensing year.

During the food inspections, we make sure that the food is being handled properly, from start to finish. This includes ensuring the food is purchased from an approved source, is in good and safe condition, and is properly cooked, cooled, stored, and reheated. We also look at the food service facility and its equipment to make sure everything is safe, in working order, and clean. As with any inspection, it is only as good as the day that it was conducted. Many factors can change in a food operation between inspections, which can lead to improper food safety practices.

So, what can you look for at a restaurant to ensure you are going to have an enjoyable and safe experience while eating out? Even if you cannot see directly into the kitchen to see how your food is prepared, you can look at the dining area and watch the staff to ensure good food safety practices are being used.

- Cleanliness of dining area:
 - Are the tables, chairs, and booths clean to sight and touch?
 - Are the utensils, plates, and bowls clean?
 - Are there pests? Flies?

- Waiting staff:
 - Do they have a clean appearance and clean clothing?
 - Are they properly handling utensils and cups? Are they only touching the handles of forks, spoons, and knives? Are they making sure not to touch food contact surfaces of plates and cups?

You can also pay attention to the way your food comes out to you.

- Cold food should be served cold.
- Hot food should be served hot.
- Lukewarm is never a good temperature.

- Appearance: Does the food look and smell like it's supposed to? Did you find something in the food that shouldn't be there? (e.g. piece of plastic or metal)
- When in doubt, never be afraid to send the food back and let the staff know what's wrong. If it doesn't seem right, don't take a chance.

By keeping these things in mind when you go out to eat, you can help protect yourself from the possibility of getting sick from food that has been improperly handled.

The safe handling of your food doesn't always stop at the restaurant, though. If you take leftovers or to-go meals with you, you also need to ensure you are properly handling your food. Even if your food is properly handled and cooked by restaurant staff, leaving your leftovers and to-go meals out for too long can lead to high bacteria growth. The high levels of certain bacteria could have the potential to cause a foodborne illness, leaving you sick. This is why you should always put your food taken from a restaurant in the fridge as soon as you can.

For more information about food safety or any of the other services that the health department provides in Meigs County, you can visit the Meigs County Health Department's website at <https://meigs-health.com>. You can also call the Meigs County Health Department Monday through Friday from 8am to 4pm at (740) 992-6626.

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