



University of California
Cooperative Extension
Tulare County

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Prepared by: Cathi Lamp, Home Economist

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Thermometers Are Key To Food Safety

Consumer behavior research shows that cooking by color is just one of the ways consumers typically judge whether or not food is “done.” Consumers said they also “eyeball” the food, go by recommended cooking time, and trust their experience and judgement. The only problem is those methods may be misleading them.

In 1995, for instance, a study by Kansas State University indicated that ground beef may turn brown before it’s cooked to a safe internal temperature sufficient to destroy potentially dangerous pathogens.

With that information in hand, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) commissioned the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Agriculture Research Service (ARS) to examine the color of ground beef nationwide as it related to doneness.

The 1998 Findings?

- One out of every four hamburgers turns brown before it’s been cooked to a safe internal temperature.
- Only 3 percent of consumers checked hamburgers with a food thermometer.

This information has led the USDA to launch a new food safety education campaign to promote the use of food thermometers. The campaign theme is: “It’s Safe to Bite When the Temperature is Right!”

This national food safety education campaign is designed to encourage consumers to use a food thermometer when cooking meat, poultry, and egg products. Using a food thermometer is the only way to tell that food has reached a high enough temperature to destroy harmful pathogens that may be in the raw food.

USDA introduced its new messenger “Thermy,” to promote the use of food thermometers in the home. Food thermometers help ensure food is cooked to a safe temperature, prevent overcooking, and take the guesswork out of preparing a safe meal. Food thermometers should not just be used for Thanksgiving turkey. They should be used year-round, every time you prepare hamburgers, poultry, roast, chops, egg casseroles, meat loaves, and combination dishes.

There are a wide variety of reliable food thermometers available in grocery and kitchen stores and many are inexpensive. The cost is minimal when considering your

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family's safety. It is especially important for people who are high-risk, including young children, pregnant women, people over 65, and those with chronic illnesses.”

Today's thermometer technologies make checking the temperature of “thin food—like hamburgers or chicken fillets—a “piece of cake.” It only takes a few seconds. For instance, digital instant-read thermometers need to be inserted only a very short way into food. As a result, consumers can easily check the temperature of thin foods by inserting the thermometer probe into food from the top.

For more information about “Thermy” and the food thermometer campaign, call the nationwide, toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555 (TTY: 1-800-256-7072). In addition, food safety information is available on the FSIS Web site: www.fsis.usda.gov/thermy.

Source: USDA, Food Safety Inspection Service