

Daily Union Article

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Title: Safe Storage Practices

I recently fielded a question about storing fresh ground beef: "If I buy fresh hamburger from the grocery store on Monday for an evening meal on Friday, will it store safely in my refrigerator for that long?" Questions about food storage, especially ground meats and poultry, are common. The questions rise from consumer concern about making sure their food is safe to eat and that they are not putting themselves or their family at risk of food borne illnesses.

The United States Department of Agriculture reports that questions about "ground meat" or "hamburger" have always been in the top five most common received on the USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline since its inception in 1985. This weekday service receives more than 80,000 calls annually regarding meat, poultry, or egg products. The Hotline is open Monday – Friday from 9 a.m. – 3 p.m. CT at 1-888-674-6854. Automated food safety messages are also available at this toll-free number 24 hours a day. Additionally, Hotline staff can be reached via email at MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov

The questions I answer about meat, poultry, and egg products are similar to those that the USDA Hotline addresses:

What's the difference between "hamburger" and "ground beef"?

Beef fat may be added to "hamburger," but not "ground beef." A maximum of 30% fat is allowed in either hamburger or ground beef. Both hamburger and ground beef can have seasonings, but no water, phosphates, extenders, or binders added. The labeling of meat food products must comply with the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) and the meat inspection regulations and labeling policies.

Our Kansas standards for store-packaged ground beef by law cannot be less than Federal standards. If products in retail stores were found to contain more than 30% fat, they would be considered "misbranded" under Federal law.

Is ground beef inspected and graded?

All meat transported and sold in interstate commerce must be federally inspected. The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) carries out USDA's responsibilities under the Federal Meat Inspection Act. These laws protect consumers by ensuring that meat products are wholesome, unadulterated, and correctly labeled and packaged.

Our own Kansas Department of Agriculture houses a Meat and Poultry Inspection program in cooperation with FSIS and is responsible for administering the Kansas Meat and Poultry Inspection Act. The Kansas Inspection program must enforce requirements at least equal to those of Federal inspection laws.

Grades are assigned as a standard of quality only. It is voluntary for a company to hire a Federal Grader to certify the quality of its product. Beef grades are USDA Prime, Choice, Select, Standard, Commercial, Utility, Cutter, and Canner. They are set by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. Most ground beef is not graded.

How do you know if ground beef sold in a store is from a USDA-inspected establishment?

Ground beef produced at a USDA-inspected plant will have a USDA establishment number on the package, written as "EST." (for "establishment") followed by a number. Much of the ground beef sold in stores today are ground in a USDA-inspected plant; sometimes the store will print the establishment number on its packaging. If you don't see an "EST." number, ask the store about its source for ground beef.

From what cuts of beef are ground beef and hamburger made?

Generally, ground beef is made from the less tender and less popular cuts of beef. Trimmings from more tender cuts may also be used. Grinding tenderizes the meat and the fat reduces its dryness and improves flavor.

What is the significance of the "Sell-By" date on the package?

"Sell-By" dates are a guide for retailers. Although many products bear "Sell-By" dates, product dating is not a Federal requirement. While these dates are helpful to the retailer, they are reliable only if the food has been kept at a safe temperature during storage and handling. USDA suggests that consumers cook or freeze ground beef within 2 days after purchase for maximum quality.

What is the safe food handling label on ground beef packages?

A [safe food handling label](#) should be on all raw or partially precooked (not ready-to-eat) meat and poultry packages (see insert.) The label tells the consumer how to safely store, prepare, and handle raw meat and poultry products in the home.

Q&A source: www.fsis.usda.gov – food safety education

Now, back to the original question: "If I buy fresh hamburger from the grocery store on Monday for an evening meal on Friday, will it store safely in my refrigerator for that long?" Simply stated: *No*. The current food safety guidelines recommend no more than two days in refrigerated storage for fresh ground beef, hamburger, turkey, veal, pork, lamb and any mixtures of these protein foods. The refrigerator temperature for these raw foods should be maintained at 40°F or below as part of these guidelines.

In this situation, the safest way to handle the fresh hamburger is to bring it home from the store and immediately put it in the freezer. Then take it out of the freezer and place on a plate in the refrigerator two days before you need to cook the hamburger. This will give it time to thaw in a temperature controlled environment and still keep it within the two day refrigerator storage limit.

For more information about food storage and safety, feel free to call me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!

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Safe Handling Instructions

This product was prepared from inspected and passed meat and/or poultry. Some food products may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly. For your protection, follow these safe handling instructions.

-  Keep refrigerated or frozen.
Thaw in refrigerator or microwave.
-  Keep raw meat and poultry separate from other foods.
Wash working surfaces (including cutting boards), utensils, and hands after touching raw meat or poultry.
-  Cook thoroughly.
-  Keep hot foods hot. Refrigerate leftovers immediately or discard.