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FOOD SAFETY WHILE BOATING

Keeping food safe for a day on the boat may not be quite as challenging as for a hike, but when you are out on the water, the direct sunlight can be an even bigger food safety problem. Remember the "Danger Zone"? It is between 41 and 140 degrees F. Bacteria multiply rapidly at warm temperatures and food can become unsafe if held in the "Danger Zone" for over 2 hours. Above 90 degrees F, food can become dangerous after only 1 hour. In direct sunlight, temperatures can climb even higher than that. So bring along plenty of ice, and keep the cooler shaded or covered with a blanket.

Keep Your Cooler Cool

A cooler for perishable food is essential. It is important to keep it closed, out of the sun, and, if possible, covered for further insulation. Better yet, bring two coolers—one for drinks and snacks, and another for highly perishable food. The drink cooler will be opened and closed a lot, which lets hot air in and causes the ice to melt faster. Pack your coolers with several inches of ice, blocks of ice, or frozen gel-packs. Store food in watertight containers to prevent contact with melting ice water.

Keep Cold Foods Cold

Perishable foods, like luncheon meats, cooked chicken (Yes, that includes fried chicken!), and potato or pasta salads, should be kept in the cooler. Remember the rule: hot foods hot, cold foods cold? And the 2-hour rule: no food should be in the "Danger Zone" for more than 2 hours? Well, unless you plan to eat that bucket of fried chicken within 2 hours *of purchase*, it needs to be kept in the cooler. For optimum safety, consider buying chicken the night before, refrigerating it in a shallow container (not the bucket), and then packing it *cold* in the cooler.

Of course, some foods don't need to be stored in the cooler—fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, trail mix, canned meat spreads, and peanut butter and jelly. (However, once canned foods are opened, put them in the cooler.) If you don't have an insulated cooler, try freezing sandwiches for your outing. Use coarse-textured breads that don't get soggy when thawed. Take the mayonnaise, lettuce, and tomato with you to add at mealtime. In a pinch, a heavy cardboard box lined with plastic bags and packed with frozen gel packs or ice will keep things cold until lunchtime. Freeze water in milk cartons for your cold source.

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Seafood

If you are planning to fish, check with your fish and game agency or State Health Department to see where you can fish safely, and then follow these guidelines:

Finfish:

Scale, gut, and clean fish as soon as they're caught.

Live fish can be kept on stringers or in live wells, as long as they have enough water and enough room to move and breathe.

Wrap fish, both whole and cleaned, in water-tight plastic and store on ice.

Keep 3 to 4 inches of ice on the bottom of the cooler. Alternate layers of fish and ice.

Store the cooler out of the sun and cover with a blanket.

Once home, eat fresh fish within 1 to 2 days or freeze them. For top quality, use frozen fish within 3 to 6 months.

Shellfish:

Crabs, lobsters, and other shellfish must be kept alive until cooked.

Store in live wells or out of water in a bushel or laundry basket under wet burlap or seaweed.

Crabs and lobsters are best eaten the day they're caught.

Live oysters should be cooked within 7 to 10 days.

Live mussels and clams should be cooked within 4 to 5 days.

Eating raw shellfish is extremely dangerous. People with liver disorders or weakened immune systems are especially at risk.

Cleanup and Hand Washing

Cleanup on the boat is similar to cleanup in the wild. Bring disposable wipes for handwashing, and bag up all your trash to dispose of when you return to shore.

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