

## **Forgot to refrigerate leftovers — Still okay to eat?** <sup>[1]</sup>

Alice,

Here's a food preparation question: I made a large tomato sauce with meatballs and several pork chops in it. I cooked it for two hours and turned the heat off at 1:00 AM and went to bed without putting it in the refrigerator. I awoke at 8:00 AM and the sauce was a few degrees above room temperature. If I reheat the sauce, will it be all right to eat? Thanks.

— Sleepy cook

### **Answer**

Dear Sleepy cook,

Sounds like a very tasty meal — one that would be tragic to discard. Unfortunately, it's likely that while you were sleeping, bacteria were partying on your stove and reproducing at alarming rates. Bacteria thrive at 40 to 140 degrees Fahrenheit (F) and reproduce quickly. Thus, it's probably a wise idea to toss the sauce and meat. It's recommended that perishable foods not be away from refrigeration for more than two hours, so seven hours might really be pushing it.

As you plan for your next culinary masterpiece, here are a few basic guidelines to follow in initial cooking, re-heating, and refrigerating leftovers:

- Tempting as it may be, it's best not to try to taste food to determine if it's spoiled. The type of bacteria that can cause food poisoning may not be detected by taste, smell, or the look of the food in question.
- Use a meat thermometer. Particularly when cooking meat and fish (e.g., beef, chicken, pork, lamb, etc.), it's critical to check the minimum internal temperature <sup>[2]</sup>. The appropriate temperature will vary, but all are above 140 degrees F.
- Allow for rest time of cooked meats if indicated. In the case of your pork chops, it's good to let them rest for three minutes after cooking. During this time, the internal temperature continues to rise, killing off harmful bacteria.
- When wrapping up freshly cooked leftovers, store in multiple smaller containers so they cool more quickly in the refrigerator.
- Reheat all leftovers to 165 degrees F (even when using a microwave).

- Know that eating perishable foods that have been away from the fridge longer than two hours may increase the risk of illness.

While it's ultimately up to you whether you eat or toss, many eaters are rightfully wary of food that has been left out of the fridge for a couple hours or more. Additionally, [Foodsafety.gov](#) [3] also has a wealth of tips and recommendations on keeping your foods fresh and safe to eat!

Best of luck with future leftovers,

Alice!

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### **Links**

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/forgot-refrigerate-leftovers-%E2%80%94-still-okay-eat-1>
- [2] <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/charts/mintemp.html>
- [3] <https://www.foodsafety.gov/>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/nutrition-physical-activity>
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