

NSW consumer food safety behavioural research

SUMMARY REPORT



The NSW Food Authority is responsible for regulating and monitoring food safety across the entire food industry supply chain in NSW – from paddock to plate.

To do this, the NSW Food Authority seeks to educate consumers by providing food safety information matters, such as good food handling practices and assistance in understanding food labels, to ensure that food stays safe and the risk of foodborne illness in the community is reduced.

Since the NSW Food Authority last did research to understand the food safety knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of consumers, there has been an emergence of numerous trends that present an increased risk of foodborne illness in the home, including:

- Increased awareness of food waste and a commitment to reducing this, encouraging consumers to use products close to or beyond their date markings
- Greater awareness of gut-health to overall wellbeing has led to the proliferation of fermented products, some of which can be brewed at home or purchased from niche operators
- Increased use of alternative ingredients, such as vegan meats and milks, which may present an issue for those with allergies or food intolerance, as well as require unfamiliar cooking and storage requirements

Updated research was needed to inform the future direction of the NSW Food Authority's education activities. In mid-2019, independent research agency, Colmar Brunton, was commissioned to conduct this research, with a focus on understanding consumers':

- ✓ Current food safety practices in the home, including defrosting, storage, preparation and cooking, managing leftovers, cleaning and hygiene
- ✓ Perceived motivations and barriers to practicing food safety
- ✓ Sources of food safety information and whether there are information gaps, and
- ✓ Experiences and actions relating to foodborne illness and food-related product recalls



The research was comprised of both qualitative and quantitative phases, including:



12

ethnographic interviews to observe consumers preparing meals for their household



1,918

NSW consumers completed an online survey, including 1,883 who prepare food in the home



6

telephone interviews with consumers aged over 65



10

telephone interviews with childcare facilities



8

telephone interviews with industry experts

How important is food safety?

There is no doubt that food safety is important to NSW consumers. When asked, nearly all consumers (94%) indicated it is important that food is safe to eat. Food safety is seen as more important than both nutritional value (89%) and potential health benefits (86%).

"I'm very concerned about it. I don't plan on having any tummy bugs that I can avoid."

– Female, 65+, Sydney

"The slightest possibility or chance that it's not safe to eat, then I wouldn't be using it".

– Female 35-49, children under 15, Sydney

Food safety is important to us, but do we know what we need to do to keep food safe and are we actually doing it?

"Generally, I try to follow good principles. I don't overthink it, I just go about doing what I've always probably done. Washing hands here and there, cleaning, using clean utensils, once stuff is cooked. I wouldn't leave it out too long, just let it cool down before putting it into the fridge. Just standard practices."

– Male 35-49, children under 15, Sydney

Most of us have an understanding of what we should be doing to prevent foodborne illness, but in practice we are a little more ad-hoc. Let's take a closer look...

Cleaning and hygiene

"It's my health, it's my relatives' health. If I mix up raw food and cooked food all together, it might be contaminated. Thinking about myself, you have to be careful about what you're doing, and it must always be clean."

– Male, 59, Empty nester, Sydney

● = Know we should do this ● = Always do this



78%

70%

Wash and dry your hands when handling food



76%

66%

Use a separate cutting board or wash it in between uses



69%

63%

Wash your sponge / cloth after cleaning spills



67%

46%

Clean benches with detergent or disinfectant



62%

49%

Use separate tea towels for different kitchen activities



61%

47%

Clean spills with paper towel or one-off tea towel/cloth



57%

57%

Discard eggs that have dirty or cracked shells

Wait, you're telling me there are 30% who do not always wash their hands when cooking?



28%

Simply forgetting to



22%

Have never thought to



21%

Can't be bothered



20%

A belief there is no need to

What about fresh food ... “to wash, or not to wash?”

Well it depends - the majority of home cooks are following best practice and washing produce, including lettuce leaves that are not bagged (86%), vegetables (82%) and fruit (77%) prior to preparation or consumption.

But when it comes to meat and poultry, there is a lot of misplaced intention among our home cooks. One third (33%) will wash their chicken and a further 20% their red meat prior to cooking.

“I wash beef, lamb, everything. Wash it because bacteria, people touching, I want it a bit cleaner. I 100% wash chicken, it’s the most important. It’s the most trouble with food poisoning - Salmonella. Some people say it’s going to cook anyway but I prefer to wash everything.”

– Male, Empty nester, Sydney

Did you know?

Washing meat and poultry increases the risk of foodborne illness as the juices can be spread to other foods, utensils, and surfaces during this process.

Within this study, households that have experienced a foodborne illness within the last 12 months were also significantly more likely to say they washed chicken (43%).

Cultural background plays a role in the washing of meats, with those from non-English speaking backgrounds significantly more likely to say they wash both chicken (55%) and red meat (41%) before cooking.

“In Europe they cut meat in front of you and keep it open on the tables. Chicken, meat, sausages... there is dust and people touching it by hand. Coming from my background, I wash it because when a butcher does it, even though it’s put in a vacuum pack, I don’t know whether the table was clean. I trust people but not 100% about safety”.

– Male, Empty nester, Sydney

Storage

● = Know we should do this

● = Always do this



72%

32%

Consume food by its ‘use by’ date



61%

37%

Read labels to check storage instructions



60%

54%

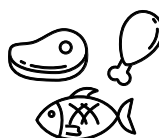
Remove leftover tinned food from the can to store in the fridge



47%

22%

Put dates on food that is stored in the freezer



47%

33%

Store raw meat, chicken and seafood at the bottom of the fridge



45%

60%

Store eggs in an egg carton in the fridge

Did you know?

Storing eggs in the carton and keeping them in the fridge can help prevent foodborne illness. That’s because the carton stops the porous shells absorbing odours from other foods, and also helps you keep track of the best before date.

Avoiding temperature fluctuation is critical to egg safety which is why eggs should be kept in the fridge.



Less than half (47%) were aware that they should store raw meat, chicken and seafood on the bottom shelf of the fridge, with many believing the top of the fridge is coolest.

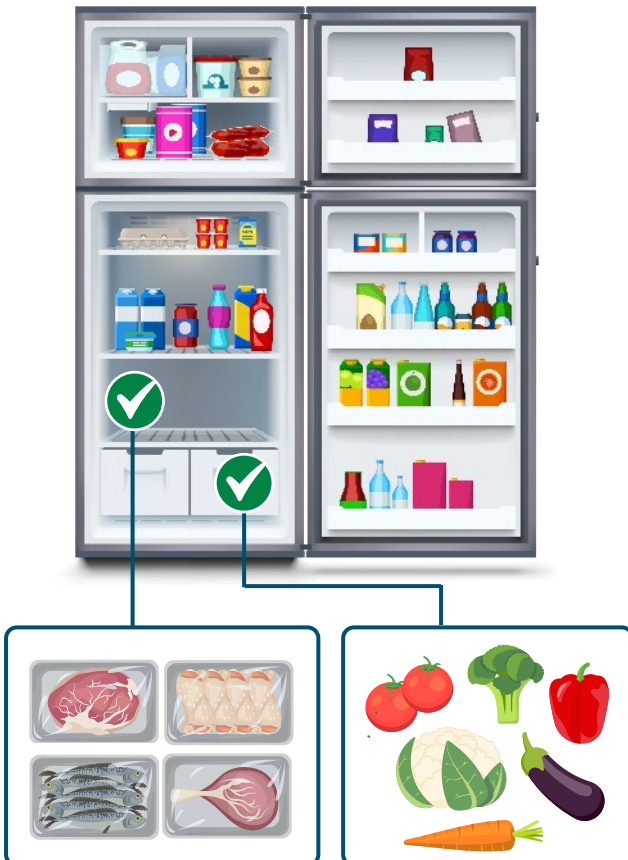
“Most fridges tell you put the vegetables at the bottom and meat at the top where it’s coldest”.

– Female, 65+, Regional NSW

“Store it at the top of fridge, or higher up in the fridge. The cooler area of the fridge.”

– Female, 18-24, Regional NSW

In fact, the main reason you should keep covered meat on the bottom shelf of the fridge is to prevent the juices from leaking onto food items on lower shelves and contaminating them.



Date marks: use by and best before dates

Most of us know we should consume food by its date mark, but less than one third of us are always doing so. The discussions with home cooks around ‘use by’ dates highlighted that for many people, they are treated as merely a guide, much like ‘best before’ dates.

This relaxed attitude is resulting in some questionable practices. Some 15% of consumers admitted eating seafood past its date mark, with 29% eating meat and 33% consuming dairy products passed their date marks.

“I’m not that uptight about use by dates, if I think it’s okay then it’s okay. If it’s something perishable or something with a high risk of food poisoning like cooked rice, I won’t keep it for more than a week”.

– Male, 25-34, Sydney

“If the milk is just past it’s use by date, I’ll pour a bit in the sink and if it hasn’t got any floaties in it I’ll use it.”

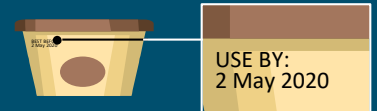
– Female, 65+, Regional NSW

“One of my daughters would throw it out right on the date. I’m more adventurous – I look at it, taste it or smell it. If it doesn’t look or smell any different to normal, then it’s fine.”

– Male, 65+, Sydney

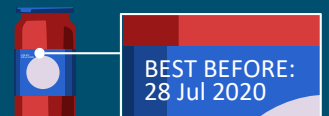
So, what do these dates actually mean?

A use by date is about **food safety**



it means the food must be eaten or thrown away by this date. After this date foods may be unsafe to eat even if they look, smell or taste fine because the nutrients in the food may become unstable or a build-up of bacteria may occur.

A best before date is about **food quality**



It means the food is still safe to eat after the date as long as it is not damaged, deteriorated or perished. A ‘best before’ date simply indicates that the food may lose some of its quality after this date.

Temperature control

Leaving hot food to cool at room temperature before refrigerating promotes bacteria growth. You should only cool hot food down until it is no longer steaming before putting in the fridge. During the interviews this caused a lot of confusion and went against some very firm and long held views.

● = Know we should do this ● = Always do this



59%

48%

Cool hot food down until it is no longer steaming before putting in the fridge



74%

73%

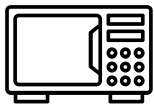
Check that meats are cooked right through to the centre



60%

50%

Reheat leftovers until they are steaming hot



58%

36%

Defrost food in the fridge, microwave or sealed in a bag of water in the sink

"I don't ever heat a meal up twice. I used to with my leftovers if I couldn't finish a portion but since my niece had food poisoning from reheating more than once I don't anymore. Food poisoning is a very serious thing. My niece was terribly sick."

– Female, 65+, Regional NSW

"I've always been funny with letting leftovers sit on the bench until it cools, I never put hot food in the fridge. I've always thought different bacteria can grow if the temperature changes suddenly."

– Female, Children under 15, Regional NSW



Did you know?

You should minimise the time that food spends in the 'temperature danger zone' - between 5°C and 60°C to keep food safe.

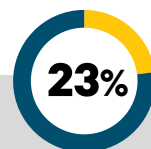
To cool leftover food quickly, divide it into smaller portions and put them in shallow containers, and as soon as it stops steaming, put them in the fridge.

Never put food that is still steaming into the fridge. Hot food can raise the temperature inside the fridge, putting it in the temperature danger zone and potentially risking other refrigerated foods.

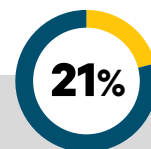
So, we're not perfect but is anyone getting sick?

Yes – 14% of NSW residents believe they have either personally experienced or have had a member of their household experience foodborne illness in the last 12 months. You may think 14% doesn't sound like a lot, but that is over 1.1 million people in NSW. Not to mention this is self-reported, which means the real figure is likely to be higher as many may not have realised they had a foodborne illness.

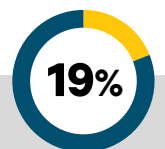
Additionally, several demographic groups were more likely to believe they have recently experienced foodborne illness:



of those from a non-English speaking background

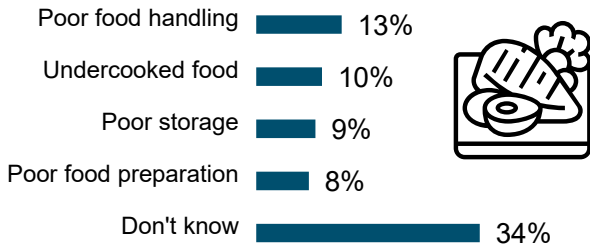


of young people aged 18-34



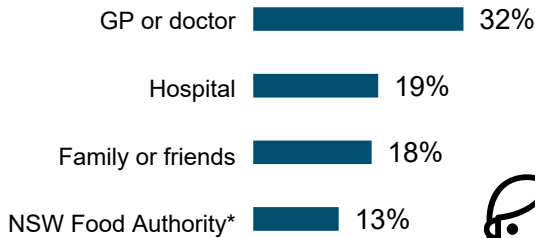
with children under 16 in the household

What do you think may have caused the illness?



Over two thirds (68%) of those who experienced an illness either reported or confided in others about it.

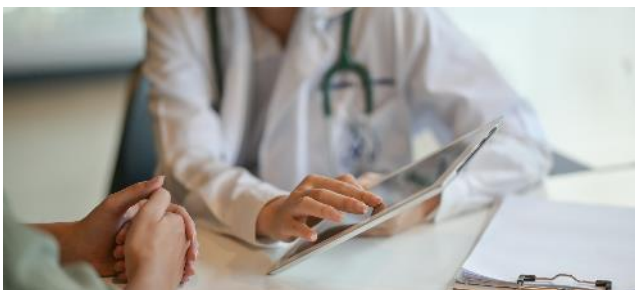
Who did you report your sickness to?



*Includes the NSW Food Authority's Helpline and social media reporting networks

The main motivations for reporting the illness were being very unwell (58%) and that medical advice was needed to get better (42%).

Among those who did not report the illness, one third (33%) felt there was no point or reason to report it as nothing would come of it. A further 27% chose not to report the illness because they did not know what actually caused it.



Are you following NSW Food Authority on Facebook or Twitter to get the latest information on product recalls and foodborne illness outbreaks?

Click on the icons to follow

What do we know about food recalls?

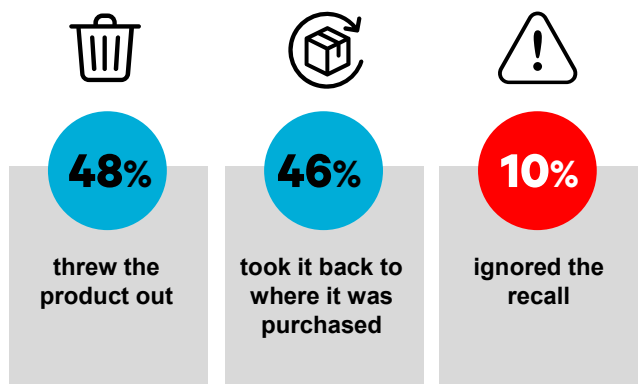
Sixteen percent of consumers could remember purchasing a food product that was later recalled.

Two thirds (66%) heard about the recall through traditional media channels, most commonly, TV news (55%).

Almost half (46%) found out via social media, including 28% on Facebook and 18% through Twitter.

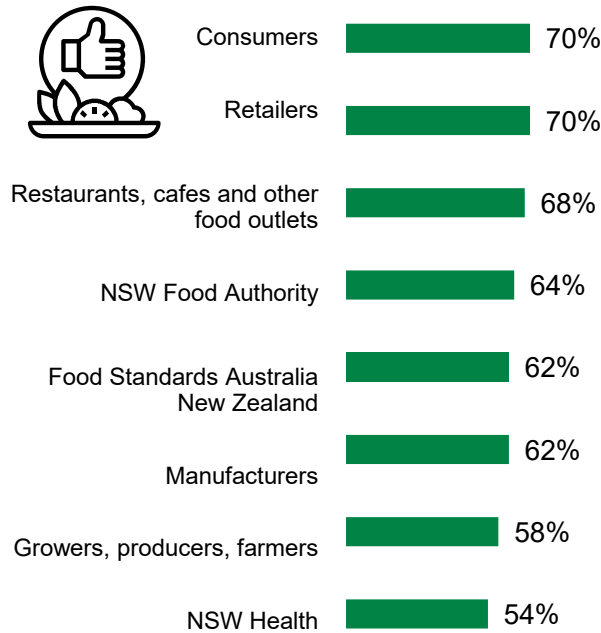


Most consumers (89%) took action as a result of hearing about the recall with the most common action being throwing the product out:



Who do we think is responsible for food safety?

From the farm to the kitchen table, everyone has a role to play in ensuring food is safe.



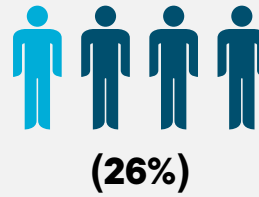
“The farmer that grows the chicken, the workers at the processing plants, the guys driving the trucks, the supermarkets, the consumers, the food regulators, the government. Responsibility lays with the whole life cycle, anyone that comes into contact with it.”

– Male, Industry expert, Regional NSW

But when it comes down to who respondents believe are **primarily** responsible for food safety, the most common answer was us, the consumers ourselves (29%). This was followed by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (17%) and the NSW Food Authority (15%).

Learning about food safety

Only...



one in four consumers say they have actively sought information or advice on food safety.

Among those who have looked for information, family and friends (40%) are the most common source, followed by food labels (25%). Forty four percent have used a government information source for food safety; including NSW Food Authority (20%), Food Standards Australia New Zealand (19%) and NSW Health (17%).

So, where did we learn about food safety?

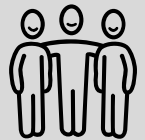
Over half of us (54%) were taught about food safety from our family and friends. But interestingly, if we wanted to find out more information, family and friends wouldn't necessarily be our main source. Instead, we are more likely to look to government sources, including:



While...

26%

would consult family and friends



Think you need to brush up on your knowledge?

Visit: www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au

for some helpful hints on how to keep food safe in your household.

For more information about this research contact the NSW Food Authority on 1300 552 406 or at food.contact@dpi.nsw.gov.au



Food Authority