

FARMERS MARKETS



How to Handle Meat, Meat Products, and Poultry

Producers are increasingly interested in selling meat at farmers markets. Locally produced goods are popular, but the federal, state and local restrictions can be complicated. There are stringent guidelines that must be followed. The manufacturing of meat or poultry products must be inspected unless the producer or business is eligible for exemption.

Slaughtering of livestock

Almost all meat must be inspected before being sold. The inspection also depends on the animal from which the meat is harvested. All meat products derived from amenable livestock species, such as cattle, swine, sheep and goats, and amenable poultry, such as chicken, turkey, duck and geese, must pass federal or state inspection. Exemption to inspection applies to amenable poultry if specific conditions are met. These conditions can be found in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's publication listed as a reference at the end of this fact sheet. For this exempted livestock, producers can always obtain a voluntary, fee-based USDA inspection.

- The meat animal that does not have an exemption must be slaughtered in a facility inspected by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service before you may legally sell the domestic meat and meat products.
- Depending on the type of product and the intended client, items manufactured from USDA-inspected carcasses must be handled in a facility inspected by either county (parish), state or USDA inspectors.
- If you are not raising and slaughtering livestock yourself, only inspected and passed meat and meat food items (those with a mark of inspection) may be used in the preparation of products, including meals, at the farmers market.
- There might be bacteria present on the surface of meat after slaughter. To minimize the rate of growth of any pathogenic germs that may be present on their surfaces, raw meat and poultry products should be kept at temperatures of 40 F or lower.
- After chilling, meat can be transported in chest coolers with ice or by using a refrigerator vehicle that continuously monitors the temperature during transportation. During transporting or storage, meat should be kept cold (40 F or below) or frozen (0 F or below).

Packaging and labeling of meat

Packaging material not only prevents cross-contamination but also increases the shelf life of the meat. Most perishable foods that are covered can be stored for longer periods of time and with greater quality than those that are not. The chemical and microbiological deterioration of many foods, including meat, is accelerated by the presence of oxygen in the air. Modified atmosphere packaging (MAP) helps prolong shelf life by replacing oxygen inside the package with other gases such as carbon dioxide and nitrogen. Vacuum packaging removes air from the package and produces a vacuum inside.

Labels can be applied to the product package as stickers or printed directly

on the package. Labels allow you to convey information to customers and build a brand by including marketing logos, a website address and contact information. All meat and poultry products must be labeled clearly with the following information:

- Name of the product.
- Inspection legend. Only meat and poultry products produced under a Federal or State Grant of Inspection will have inspection legends on their labels indicating that they were inspected. The USDA assigns a distinctive mark of inspection and an establishment (EST) number to all meat and poultry products that are handled and inspected. The EST number is specific to the slaughter or processing facility and is used for traceability.
- Name and address of the processor or manufacturer.
- Net weight, which is the weight of an item or product before the packaging or container is added.
- Ingredient list.
- Allergen list.
- Safe handling instructions. This should include statements such as "Keep refrigerated or frozen until ready to use. Refrigerate or microwave to thaw." This could also include cooking or preparing instructions, if needed.

Safety steps for preparing meat and poultry products

If you prepare meat and sell it in the farmers market, you must take precautions to ensure food safety so that the food you sell to consumers is safe all the way to the table. Here are the basic food safety steps that should be followed while handling and preparing meat products:

- Always keep the meat and poultry refrigerated or frozen until you are ready to prepare them.
- Defrost the meat in the refrigerator, in chilly water or in the microwave. Do not defrost meat at room temperature.
- When defrosting with a microwave, some portions of meat may begin to cook resulting in temperatures that are high enough for hazardous bacteria to flourish. Therefore, always cook fresh meat and poultry products right after they have been defrosted in the microwave.
- Thoroughly wash hands with plain soap and water before and after handling meat and meat products.
- Fresh meat and its juices should be kept separate from other items while refrigerated and during preparation.
- Wash all utensils, cutting surfaces and worktops with hot, soapy water before and after handling meat or poultry. Use a separate chopping board for fresh meat and poultry products. Also, use separate plates and utensils for raw meat and cooked meat.



Do not use same cutting board for fresh produce and raw meat.
Photo credit: Jyoti Aryal.

- To eliminate any hazardous bacteria that may be present, cook all meat and poultry items to the recommended internal temperature: 145 F for fresh beef, veal, lamb, pork and ham; and 160 F for ground beef, pork, veal and lamb; and 165 F for poultry including ground turkey and chicken.
- Note: For safe consumption, ground beef should be cooked to 160 F, although roast beef only must be cooked to 145 F. Since germs are found on the meat's surface, grinding disperses microorganisms throughout the meat necessitating a higher temperature to reach and kill them.
- Use a food thermometer. Place the food thermometer in the thickest portion of the food when you think it is done, being careful not to contact bone, fat or gristle.
- If you do not plan serve the food immediately, chill it quickly to prevent the growth of bacteria. Divide large quantities of food into smaller portions or spread it out in a shallow container to speed up the chilling process.

Selling meat, meat products and poultry at farmers markets

Most of the raw meat, meat products, poultry and cooked meat need certain time and temperature controls for safety and to prevent unsafe bacterial growth. You can keep the meat safe by minimizing the time they spend in the temperature danger zone which between 40 F and 140 F.

- If you are serving food hot, make sure it stays at 140 F or above. If the food is served or sold cold, it should be at 40 F and below. Mechanical refrigerators or coolers with ice can be used to store cold meats, and crockpots and chafing dishes can be used to hold hot foods. If using coolers with ice, make sure that the ice is made with potable water. To avoid food products sitting in water, the cooler should have appropriate drainage for ice melt.
- Raw meat is usually already packaged from the slaughterhouse. Any food prepared before selling should already be in packaged form and stored where the temperature can be controlled and monitored. A calibrated thermometer can be used to monitor the temperature of meat and meat products while transporting and selling.
- The vendor should make sure there is no leakage from the packaging before selling it to their customers. To reduce the possibility of cross-contamination, raw meat should be kept away from other foods.
- Meat or meat products should not be kept on display at room temperature. Even when it is on display, all hot meals must maintain a temperature of 140 F or above, while cold items must maintain a temperature of 40 F or lower.
- Use separate shopping bags for meat and other food products to avoid cross-contamination.

Offering samples of your prepared ready-to-eat food products at the farmers market is one method to boost sales. However, certain guidelines must be followed if you are serving samples at the farmer's market. These include:

- Food samples must be prepared or sliced on-site or in a licensed kitchen. When cutting produce, use clean and sanitized blades, tools and cutting boards. Make sure to wash your hands before handling any food or utensils.
- Bring enough clean utensils and equipment for preparation and serving so that no dirty item is reused during the sampling event.
- Samples provided must be safe for human consumption without any signs of spoilage. Samples should also be in temperature-controlled conditions, and any food sitting out for more than two hours should be discarded.
- Ask the consumers to wash their hands thoroughly before taking the samples.

Reference

U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2006). Guidance for Determining Whether a Poultry Slaughter or Processing Operation is Exempt from Inspection Requirements of the Poultry Products Inspection Act. Rev. 1. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. https://www.fsis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/import/Poultry_Slaughter_Exemption_0406.pdf



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Pub. 3864-G (Online Only) 11/22

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