

Safety Note #148

SAFE PRACTICES FOR OFFICE REFRIGERATOR USE



Everyone seems to have a scary office refrigerator story. A few examples are: Cow manure samples stored next to food items; food with expiration dates up to a year old; a sack lunch from an employee who left several months ago; flammable and other hazardous products stored with food; something growing and smelling up the refrigerator; and a frozen lab rat in the freezer. These types of examples can create a potentially hazardous and poisonous situation in an office refrigerator.

Refrigerators are the most important piece of equipment in the office kitchen or break room for keeping foods safe. Refrigeration slows bacterial growth, while the freezer stops most bacterial growth. Bacteria grow most rapidly in the temperature range between 40 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

It is helpful to have an office refrigerator policy that includes the following safe practices.

Safe Practices

- ONLY STAFF FOOD is to be stored in the office refrigerator. No lab samples or experiments, harmful chemicals, or harmful products are to be stored in the office refrigerator.
- Keep the refrigerator temperature at 40 degrees or lower to keep bacterial growth slow.
- Keep the freezer temperature at 0 degrees or lower to stop bacterial growth. Note - Freezing does not kill bacteria.
- Perishable foods, including meat, fish, eggs, tofu, cooked pasta, fruit, and produce, should be removed from the refrigerator at the end of the week and before holidays.
- Foods that are shared by staff, such as ice cream should be labeled with a date and thrown away based on their "used by" date.
- Use safe handling food procedures for food being shared (such as potlucks or sandwiches) in the break room. Perishable foods should never be left at room temperature for more than 2 hours. This includes the original time it was set out for serving.
- Keep the refrigerator clean. Clean surfaces with hot, soapy water, then rinse with clean water. If you spill something in the refrigerator – clean it up!
- When in doubt, toss it out! If you are unsure how long a perishable food has been in the refrigerator, toss it out! You can't always see, smell, or taste bacteria that can make you sick.
- For safety and quality, eat refrigerated leftovers within a day or two. Keep leftovers in sealable containers, such as Rubbermaid, to keep food fresh and prevent unwanted odors.
- To keep the refrigerator smelling fresh and help eliminate odors, place an open box of baking soda on a shelf.
- Hot food can be placed directly into the refrigerator.
- Shared office work/food use surfaces such as tables or countertops must be cleaned with soap and water before placing food on them.
- If a laboratory is in the building, it is recommended that a sign be posted on the office refrigerator stating "FOOD ONLY." The lab use refrigerator should have "LAB ONLY" posted on it.

For further information on food and kitchen safety, please visit the ANR EH&S Food Safety link at: http://safety.ucanr.edu/Programs/Food_Safety_Education/