

Frequently Asked Food Safety Questions

What are the 'tiny, little bugs, worms or weevils' that I'm finding in my flour, pasta, rice, etc. (dry food products)?

Answer: The insect pests that most commonly infest food items include saw-toothed grain beetles, flour beetles, Indian meal moths, and carpet beetles. Collectively they are referred to as "flour weevils," but this is misleading since true weevils are seldom found, and when they are discovered, true weevils infest many non-flour food items.

How are infestations prevented or controlled?

Answer: Proper buying, storing and housekeeping are still the best methods to prevent stored-food insect problems. To minimize or prevent infestations, keep the kitchen, pantry and other food storage areas clean and free of spilled dry food products like flour, grains, cereal products and pet food. Store dry food items in clean, food-safe metal, glass or hard plastic containers with tight-fitting lids. Plastic, burlap, paper and cloth bags offer little protection against insects, mice or moisture and are not recommended for food storage.

Rotate food supply so that previously purchased foods are consumed first. Regularly inspect cupboards and storage areas for signs of infestation. If signs of larvae or adult insects are found, clear the area of dishes, foods and shelf coverings. Once clear, vacuum the entire area, including cracks and corners of storage shelves. Discard the vacuum bag and then scrub shelves, walls, ceilings and floors with a solution of very hot water and strong dishwashing detergent. Rinse well and allow drying. Discard heavily infested products.

Are infested food products still safe to eat?

Answer: Heavily infested food products should be discarded because of their decreased nutritional values and their increased risk of spoilage and food borne illness. Often it is not necessary to destroy lightly infested grain or flour products, depending upon your tolerance level.

If you want to save slightly infested products, treat small quantities at a time by either heating or freezing. If heating, heat oven to 140 degrees. Put grain or flour in shallow pan and place in oven for 30 minutes. This process will destroy the grain's germinating ability. (DO NOT microwave grain or flour products—microwaving may scorch the product or set it on fire!)

If freezing, place small packages in the freezer at zero degrees F or below for at least four days. Leave larger packages for at least seven days. This process may cause excessive moisture in the product if it is defrosted in a humid room. Source of information—Controlling Stored-food Pests in the Home (CIS 850)
<http://info.ag.uidaho.edu/catalog/catalog.html>

During the Holidays, we received "Bread in a Jar" from a dear friend. We do not wish to hurt her feelings, but we are wondering if it is safe to eat.

Answer: Breads and cakes baked in glass jars have become popular home-made gifts over the last few years, but are not recommended as a safe food product. The bread or cake is not really home-canned. It is baked in an open glass canning jar and immediately covered with a canning lid after removing from the oven. As the bread or cake cools, a vacuum seal is formed—there is no further processing involved. Although no cases of botulism have been traced to home-canned breads, the potential is there. Three factors determine if *C. botulinum*, when present, will grow: a non-acid pH, adequate moisture and an airless environment.

Canned breads meet all these requirements. Source of information: Safety of Canning Quick Breads, Dr. Charlotte P. Brennand, Utah State University Extension and Canning Breads and Cakes?, Elizabeth L. Andress, Ph.D., and Judy A. Harrison, Ph.D., Extension Foods Specialists, University of Georgia Cooperative Extension.

Are canned foods that have frozen during storage safe to eat? Answer:

Freezing does not cause food spoilage unless the seal or jar is damaged or broken. With commercially canned foods, the food is safe to eat if the cans are undamaged. All food that has been frozen in tin cans should be examined carefully for spoilage before use. For an extra margin of safety, boil low acid foods (meats, fish, poultry and vegetables) for 10 minutes.

Discard all foods with an off color or odor. DO NOT TASTE food that looks or smells suspicious. Discard all damaged, leaking or bulged cans that have thawed. With home-canned foods, the food is safe to eat if the jars are still sealed and there is no breakage. Discard all home-canned foods from jars where the seal is broken or the jar is cracked and the food is thawed. Source of information: Food Safety Advisor Handbook (EM4895), page 216. National Center for Home Food Preservation: <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp>

LINKS

Food Safety and Inspection Service. The Food Safety and Inspection Service is the public health agency within the United States Department of Agriculture responsible for ensuring that the nation's commercial food supply is safe, wholesome and correctly labeled and packaged. Their website not only offers detailed food safety information, but also educational materials, fact sheets and a 2005 Food Safety Planner as well. <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>

National Center for Home Food Preservation. The National Center for Home Food Preservation is an extensive on-line source for current research-based information and methods regarding home food preservation and food safety. User friendly! <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp>