



## ARE MOLDY FOODS SAFE TO USE?

The safety of moldy foods depends upon the type of food involved. Some molds cause allergic reactions and respiratory problems. Some types of mold form other poisonous compounds called aflatoxins on certain foods that have been mishandled. These aflatoxins are carcinogenic and may cause cancer of the liver.

Foods on which aflatoxins may form are grains, breads, nutmeats, and legumes such as beans and peas, either dried, canned or cooked. These foods should not be eaten if they show any signs of mold.

It isn't easy to tell if a mold is dangerous. Scraping mold off food isn't always a safe thing to do. Mold is a type of fungus. In many molds, the body consists of *root* threads that invade the food it lives on, a stalk that rises above the food and spores that form at the ends of the stalks. The spores give the mold the color you see. When airborne, the spores spread the mold from place to place like dandelion seed.

Once a food shows heavy mold growth, you can bet that the *root* threads have invaded it deeply. In dangerous molds, the mycotoxins are often contained in and around these threads. In some cases, the toxins have spread throughout the food.

While most molds prefer warmer temperatures, they can grow in the colder range. Molds also tolerate salt and sugar better than most other food invaders. So you may find mold in refrigerated jams and jellies (*high sugar*) and on cured, salty meats (*ham, bacon, salami*).

Quick shopping sometimes means you don't examine food well before you buy it. It's important to check food in glass jars and fresh fruits and vegetables for mold growth. Check the stem areas on fresh produce. Notify the store manager about mold on any foods.

Fresh meat and poultry are usually mold-free, but cured meats and smoked turkey may not be. Examine them carefully. Exceptions? Some salamis – San Francisco and Italian types – have a characteristic thin, white mold coating. They shouldn't show any other mold.

When serving food, keep it covered to prevent exposure to mold spores in the air. Plastic wrap is good for food you want to stay moist – fresh or cut fruits or vegetables, green and mixed salads. Just remember, don't leave any perishables out of the refrigerator over two hours.

Don't want moisture buildup? Cake and cheese keepers with their own covers will protect these foods without excess moisture buildup. For breads, use clean paper towels as a cover – this lets bread *breathe*.

Empty opened cans of perishable food into clean refrigerator dishes and refrigerate promptly. Reseal boxed food as tightly as possible to keep air that contains mold spores out.

Buying smaller amounts of food and using it quickly can help prevent mold growth. When you see moldy food, however, don't sniff the moldy item. You don't want respiratory trouble. If food is covered with mold, discard it. Put it in a small paper bag or wrap it in plastic for disposal in a covered trash can children and animals can't get into. Clean the refrigerator, if necessary, where the food was sitting. Check nearby items it might have touched. Mold spreads quickly in fruits and vegetables.

If the food shows only a tiny mold spot, use the guidelines on the reverse. Generally, it is suggested that you can save hard or firm foods with only minor mold problems, but discard most soft or liquid foods showing mold.

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## ONE-SHEET ANSWERS

Published November 1999

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## ...more on ARE MOLDY FOODS SAFE TO USE?

### GUIDELINES FOR USING MOLDY FOODS

#### Cheese

Some cheese is made with mold, but you may spot mold that shouldn't be there. In hard block cheeses, cut off at least an inch around and below the mold spot. Keep your knife or instrument out of the mold itself. After the *surgery*, re-cover the cheese in fresh wrap. Don't try to save individual cheese slices, soft cheese, cottage cheese, cream, sour cream, or yogurt.

#### Hard Salamis and Country Hams

You can cut a small spot of mold off hard salamis using the cheese rule. Again, keep the knife out of the mold.

You can cut mold off dry-cured country ham if it's only a small, surface spot. You can cut away a small mold on the inside of country ham too, following the cheese rule. But if the ham is covered with brown or black mold, discard it.

Discard moldy bacon, hotdogs, sliced lunch meats, meat pies or opened canned ham.

#### Smoked Turkey

Cut a small mold spot off the surface using the cheese rule. Throw moldy cooked chicken out.

#### Jams, Jellies, Syrups

Discard such items showing *any* mold growth. Experts now feel mold toxins (*if present*) can spread through this soft material quite rapidly.

#### Fruits and Vegetables

Cut out small mold spots from the surface of firm fruits and vegetables (*cabbage, bell peppers, carrots*), but discard soft vegetables (*tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce*) showing mold.

#### Potatoes

Note any damaged areas on the surface and cut away tissue that is blackened or discolored. It's best to do this before cooking, but you can also do it after cooking and before eating.

#### General

**Throw away on sight and discard** visibly moldy bread, cake, buns, pastry, corn-on-the-cob, stored nuts, flour, whole grains, rice, dried peas and beans, and peanut butter.

Carefully check any foods you've had a while that the store or seller sold as *natural*. Processed without preservatives, they are prone to mold growth.

There is continual federal monitoring of crops at high risk for toxic mold growth. These crops include grains, nuts, celery, apples and tomatoes. Government works with farmers and the food industry to ensure that these foods and products made from them are safe when they arrive at the grocery. Your responsibility begins when you take food home.

Source: *Food News for Consumers*, Winter 1993.

Adapted from *MOLDY FOODS – ARE THEY SAFE TO USE?*, DANR-NR #FS102, by Susan Osaki and C. Gavranich. UC Cooperative Extension, Auburn, CA. 1994.

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