

Cool Cleaning
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When was the last time anyone cleaned out the household refrigerator? No one remembers? Then, it is time to get busy and get this neglected chore done. Refrigeration slows down the organisms that can bring poisoning and spoilage to food, but it will not kill the nasty things outright. As the recent outbreaks of listeria prove, some organisms will actually grow and spread in the refrigerator, so cleanliness and safe food handling practices remain imperative.

To begin the dreaded cleaning job, turn the temperature control to off and empty the entire refrigerator. Sort the food as it comes from the fridge and toss old or spoiled food. Keep the good food cool, in another refrigerator or a cooler. Then, clean the inside of the refrigerator. Using warm, soapy water, remove and wash all the shelves and drawers, then wash down the inside walls and doors of the refrigerator. Dry everything with a dry cloth and replace the cleaned pieces. Be sure to wipe off the rubber gasket around the door with a damp cloth.

Put the good food back in the refrigerator. Wipe off the outsides of bottles and jars before returning these to the proper places. Wrap foods with plastic wrap or place in covered containers to prevent cross-contamination in case of spills. In addition, the University of Davis Cooperative Extension recommends the following:

- All cut or prepared fruits and vegetables should be stored in the refrigerator along with many types of whole fruits and vegetables.
- When using the refrigerator, place produce in the produce drawer or on a refrigerator shelf.
- Store meat, poultry, and fish in the clean meat drawer or on a tray on the bottom shelf below other refrigerated foods. This prevents meat, poultry, or fish juices from dripping on other food.

When the food has been returned to the clean refrigerator, reset the control knobs to ensure a proper operating temperature of 40°F - 34°F, and shut the door. All done. Well, not quite. How about cleaning the outside of the unit? Use warm soapy water and wipe down all the sides. Do not forget to remove and empty the drip tray, if the refrigerator has one. Vacuum the coils to reduce dust buildup and the job is complete. (Oops, do not forget to dust the top!)

For questions about safe home food preservation, or to schedule a speaker for organizations or clubs on the topics of food safety or food preservation, call the Master Food Preservers at (530) 621-5506. For more information, be sure to go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Food_Preservers/. Sign up to receive our new Master Food Preservers E-Newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpnews/>.