Can I eat that?

Hate to waste? Moldy cheese and other questionable foods (days-old leftovers, anyone?) are often fine. SELF gets the scoop on when to dine, when to ditch.

By Stephanie Clarke, R.D., and Willow Jarosh, R.D.

Q *Is it OK to trim off the moldy parts of cheese, fruit and yogurt and eat the rest?*

A Hard cheeses (cheddar, Parmesan, Swiss) are safe to consume once you've removed the moldy portion and about an inch around it. But beware of fuzzy or odd-colored spots on soft cheeses (goat, cottage), as well as produce and yogurt. Mold spreads easily on these foods because they're moist, so it's best to discard the whole thing, advises Christine Bruhn, Ph.D., director of the Center for Consumer Research at the University of California at Davis. Mold in the veins of blue cheeses and on the rind of Brie and Camembert is supposed to be eaten; for these varieties, abide by the use-by date. What if you accidentally eat some "bad" mold? The taste will likely tip you off before you consume enough to become ill.

Q *Chicken is done when it turns white, right?*

A Not so fast. Pinkish poultry and meat might actually be thoroughly cooked, whereas browned beef and white chicken could be too undercooked to eat. "Color and texture are not reliable ways to tell if pathogens such as E. coli and salmonella, which can cause flulike symptoms, have been destroyed," warns Tina Hanes, R.D., a technical information specialist at the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. "The only way to know for certain is to use a meat thermometer." To kill harmful bugs, cook poultry to an internal temperature of 165°, pork and ground meat to 160° and steaks and roasts to 145°.

Q *Those leftovers have been in the fridge a few days, but they smell fine. Toss or try?*

A Bacteria thrive in temperatures above 40°. Make sure your refrigerator is no warmer than that by placing an appliance thermometer on the top shelf if yours doesn't already have one. But even properly refrigerated, food left too long can spoil. Remember: Leftovers, including takeout and homemade meals, have already spent time in air above 40°. If something looks or smells off after even a day, trash it. But bear in mind that most nasty pathogens don't produce a smell or anything visible, so don't let *any* leftovers linger more than a few days.

Q *I thawed a package of hamburger patties to cook one, then refroze the others. How long can I continue to refreeze them?*

A Food can be safely refrozen as long as it still has ice crystals or hasn't warmed to higher than 40°, Bruhn says. Achieve this state by thawing foods in the fridge; it takes longer than leaving them on the counter, so make the freezer-to-fridge transfer the night before you plan to cook. If you don't use thawed meat and forget to refreeze it that day, it will keep one or two days in the fridge.

Q *Coffee doesn't cut it without milk, but the carton expired yesterday. Is that date final?*

A If milk (or any perishable food) has been properly stored, it should be safe to consume for five to seven days after the sell-by date, which is the last day the store should display a product. Once it's in your fridge, you should go by the *use*-by date, the last day the item will be at its optimal taste and texture. Luckily, milk is one of those foods for which flavor and aroma *can* signal spoilage; if it smells sour, scrap it.

Q *Help! The power went out overnight. How long will foods keep in the closed freezer?*

A Frozen foods act as ice packs to maintain the cold temperature. Items in a stocked freezer will last about 48 hours; foods in a half-full freezer will remain frosty for only 24 hours or so. The fridge temp will rise to above 40° after about four hours sans power, so discard perishable stuff after that. True, wasting food is a shame, but it's better to be safe than sick! ■