2-hour / 4-hour rule

If you're a food business, using the 2-hour / 4-hour rule is a good way to keep food that's taken out of the fridge safe.

Why use it?

The 2-hour/4-hour rule is a good way to make sure potentially hazardous food is safe even if it's been out of refrigeration.

The rule has been scientifically checked and is based on how quickly microorganisms grow in food at temperatures between 5°C and 60°C.

How it works

- Food held between 5°C and 60°C for less than 2 hours can be used, sold or put back in the refrigerator to use later.
- Food held between 5°C and 60°C for 2-4 hours can still be used or sold, but can't be put back in the fridge.
- Food held between 5°C and 60°C for 4 hours or more must be thrown away.

The time between 5°C and 60°C is cumulative— that means you need to add up every time the food has been out of the fridge, including during preparation, storage, transport and display.

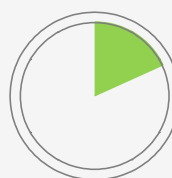As long as you follow this, you can be confident the food is safe.

Need more information?

Safe Food Australia is a guide to the food safety standards in Chapter 3 of the Food Standards Code. Using time as a control is explained in Appendix 2. Copies of the guide, some translated fact sheets and other information is available at www.foodstandards.gov.au/safefood or by emailing information@foodstandards.gov.au.
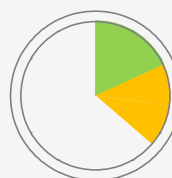
How do I use the rule?

- Start timing from when the food is brought out of refrigeration (at 5°C or below).
- Keep track of how long the food is out of refrigeration so you can be sure when the 2-hour and 4-hour time limits are reached (e.g. write down each time food is brought out of refrigeration and put back, or display food on colour-coded plates so you know when they have to be sold by).
- Remember to add up all time periods the food has been between 5°C and 60°C to work out the total time. If in doubt, throw it out.

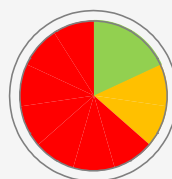### Total time between 5°C and 60°C

Under 2 hours
OK to use or refrigerate at 5°C or less

2 to 4 hours
OK to use straight away but can't go back in the fridge.

Over 4 hours
Throw away