Dear Alice,
When cooking and you have leftovers, should they be put in the refrigerator while hot? Or should you cool them first?

**Answer**

Dear Reader,

Despite what you may have heard, you don’t need to wait for hot food to cool before putting it in the fridge. Your fridge is designed to cool things down, so let it fulfill its refrigerating destiny! In fact, leaving food out to cool before tucking it away in the fridge gives bacteria the chance to multiply. So unless you want a side of germs with your leftovers, it’s a good idea to get them into the fridge as soon as possible.

When it comes to storing leftovers, make sure they are covered to keep in moisture and prevent them from drying out. Of course, covering hot leftovers then throwing them in a cold fridge may keep in too much moisture in the form of condensation. If you want to avoid this, you could try letting them cool *in the fridge* without a lid for a few minutes before covering them to minimize unwanted condensation in the container. Or, if you’re truly opposed to putting hot foods into the fridge, place the containers of food in an ice or cold water bath to cool them as quickly as possible before storing them in the refrigerator. Just remember, the likelihood that unwanted bacteria might take up residence increases the longer food is kept at room temperature. Don’t give the bacteria the opportunity to enjoy your leftovers before you do.

For quicker cooling, you may also want to consider splitting up your leftovers into smaller, shallow containers. This is especially helpful for soups or large portions of protein like chicken or beef (easy grab and go lunches, anyone?). Make sure to not overstuff your fridge so that it can work as efficiently as possible and allow cold air to circulate.

Overall, a general rule of thumb is to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. This sounds pretty simple, but the take-home lesson is that both hot or cold leftovers need to be reheated or refrigerated within two hours (unless it’s over 90 degrees Fahrenheit outside? then make sure to pop it in the fridge within one hour) to prevent a garnish of bacteria that could potentially put you at greater risk of becoming sick. For more information on properly preparing and storing food, check out [Foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov) [2].
Here’s to a safer second helping of your tasty meals,

Alice!

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