Forgot to refrigerate leftovers? still okay to eat? [1]

Alice,

Here's a food preparation question: I made a large tomato sauce with meatballs and several pork chops in it. I cooked it for two hours and turned the heat off at 1:00 AM and went to bed without putting it in the refrigerator. I awoke at 8:00 AM and the sauce was a few degrees above room temperature. If I reheat the sauce, will it be all right to eat? Thanks.

?Sleepy cook

Answer

Dear Sleepy cook,

Sounds like a very tasty meal? one that would be tragic to discard. Unfortunately, it is likely that while you were sleeping, bacteria were partying on your stove and reproducing at alarming rates. Bacteria thrive at 40 to 140 degrees F and reproduce quickly. Thus, you should probably toss the sauce. Perishable foods should not be away from the fridge for more than two hours; seven hours would really be pushing it. Here are a few basic guidelines to follow in re-heating and refrigerating leftovers:

- Tempting as it may be, do not taste food to determine if it is spoiled. You may get sick even from a small taste and your taste buds may not always detect good sauce gone bad.
- Invest in a meat thermometer.
- When initially cooking beef, chicken, or pork, make sure the meat reaches a minimum internal temperature of 160 degrees.
- Make sure fish reaches a minimum temperature of 145 degrees.
- Reheat all leftovers to 165 degrees.
- Bring leftover sauces, soups, and gravy to a boil.
- When wrapping up freshly cooked leftovers, store in multiple smaller containers so they cool more quickly.
- Know that eating perishable foods that have been away from the fridge longer than two hours can be risky.

While it's ultimately up to you whether you eat or toss, wise eaters are wary of food that has been out a couple hours or more. Best of luck with future leftovers,

Alice!

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