

## Safe Handling of Lamb

### Selecting the Best

**Fresh is Best:** Select lamb that is pinkish red with a velvety texture. Dark red cuts generally indicate the meat is older and less tender. Look for good marbling (white flecks of fat within the meat muscle), and meat that is fine textured and firm.

- Look for packages that are cool to the touch and have no wear or punctures.
- Always remember to select meat just before checking out at the supermarket register.
- Make sure all meats, whether raw, pre-packaged or from the deli are refrigerated when purchased.
- Prevent "cross-contamination" by keeping fresh meats separate from other items. Put raw meat packages in a plastic bag so juices won't drip onto other foods.
- Pack raw meats in an ice chest if it will take more than an hour to get home. Keep ice chest in the passenger area of the car during warm weather.
- Take meats straight home to the refrigerator or freezer.

**Product Dating:** Product dating, applying "sell by" or "use by" dates, is not required by federal regulations. However, many stores and processors may voluntarily choose to date packages of raw lamb. Use or freeze products with a "sell by" date within three to five days of purchase. If the manufacturer has determined a "use by" date, observe it. It's always best to buy a product before its date expires. It's not important if a date expires after freezing lamb because all foods stay safe while properly frozen.

**Product Inspection & Grading:** All lamb found in retail stores is either USDA-inspected for wholesomeness or inspected by state systems which have standards equal to the federal government. Each animal and its internal organs are inspected for signs of disease. The "Passed and Inspected by USDA" seal ensures that the lamb is wholesome and free from disease.

Although inspection is mandatory, its grading for quality is voluntary, and a plant pays to have its lamb graded. USDA Lamb Quality Grades are based upon palatability-indicating characteristics of the lean and carcass conformation. Conformation has no direct influence upon the eating quality. For lamb and yearling mutton the quality grades are Prime, Choice, Good and Utility.

### Storing

**Refrigeration:** Packaged whole cuts of fresh lamb may be refrigerated in their original wrapping in the coldest part of the refrigerator up to four or five days after purchase. Ground lamb can be stored in the refrigerator for up to two days; cooked lamb is at its best refrigerated no longer than four days.

- Use an appliance thermometer and maintain a temperature of 34 to 38 °F.
- NEVER leave meat in a hot car or sitting out at room temperature. Refrigerate or freeze fresh lamb IMMEDIATELY after bringing it home.
- Store uncooked lamb items together, separate from cooked foods. Make sure the raw juices do not drip onto other foods.
- Keep lamb refrigerated until you are ready to cook it.
- When transporting uncooked or cooked lamb to another dining site, place it in an insulated container or ice chest until ready to cook or eat.

**Freezing:** Freeze whole cuts of fresh lamb if you do not plan to cook it within four days after purchase. Wrap whole cuts of lamb separately in heavy-duty foil or moisture- and vapor-proof freezer bags or wrap before freezing. Label for ease in selecting just the right number of cuts to thaw for a single meal. Be sure to press the air out of the package before freezing. If you plan to freeze lamb in its original wrapping, overwrap the porous store plastic with freezer bag or paper. Cooked lamb cuts may be frozen in the same way as fresh, unless made with a sauce or gravy. In that case, pack the meat in a rigid container with a tight-fitting lid.

## Preparation

### Cleanliness:

- Always wash hands thoroughly with hot, soapy water before preparing foods and after handling raw meat.
- Don't let raw meat or juices touch ready-to-eat foods either in the refrigerator or during preparation.
- Don't put cooked foods on the same plate that held raw lamb.
- Always wash utensils that have touched raw meat with hot, soapy water before using them for cooked meats.
- Wash counters, cutting boards and other surfaces raw meats have touched.

**Thawing:** Thaw uncooked lamb in the refrigerator or in cold water. NEVER thaw meat at room temperature. Thawing by refrigeration requires planning ahead, most likely allowing a 24-hour thawing period. After defrosting raw lamb by this method, it will be safe in the refrigerator up to five days before cooking. During this time, if you decide not to use the lamb, you can safely refreeze it without cooking it first. To thaw lamb in cold water, leave the meat in its original wrapping or place it in a watertight plastic bag. Change the water every 30 minutes.

For quick thawing of uncooked or cooked lamb, use the microwave, but plan on cooking the meat immediately after thawing because some areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook during microwaving. Thawing time will vary according to whether you're thawing a whole roast or cuts and the number of parts frozen together. Use the DEFROST or MEDIUM-LOW setting,

according to the manufacturer's directions. Turn the roast and separate parts as they thaw, taking care the meat does not begin to cook. Repeat as needed. Foods defrosted by the cold water method or in the microwave should be cooked before refreezing because they may have been held at temperatures above 40 °F.

**Marinating:** Marinate food in the refrigerator, not on the counter. Discard the marinade after use because it contains raw juices, which may harbor bacteria. If you want to use the marinade as a dip or sauce, reserve a portion before adding raw food.

**Partial Cooking or Browning:** Never brown or partially cook lamb, then refrigerate and finish cooking later, because any bacteria present would not have been destroyed. It is safe to partially pre-cook or microwave lamb immediately before transferring it to the hot grill or oven to finish cooking.

## Cooking

**Importance of Kitchen Thermometers:** One of the critical factors in controlling bacteria in food is controlling temperature. Pathogenic microorganisms grow very slowly at low temperatures, multiply rapidly in mid-range temperatures and are killed at high temperatures. For safety, foods must be cooked thoroughly. It is essential to use a thermometer when cooking meat and poultry to prevent undercooking and, consequently, prevent foodborne illness.

Using a thermometer is the only reliable way to ensure safety and to determine the "doneness" of most foods. To be safe, a product must be cooked to an internal temperature high enough to destroy any harmful bacteria that may have been in the food. Recent research has shown that color and texture indicators are not reliable.

**Cooking the Meat:** For safety, the USDA recommends cooking ground lamb patties and other ground mixtures to 160 °F. Whole muscle meats such as chops and roasts should be cooked to 145 °F (medium-rare), 160 °F (medium) or 170 °F (well-done). Remember that appliances and outdoor grills can vary in heat. Use a meat thermometer to check for safe cooking and doneness of lamb.

Cooked muscle meats can be pink even when the meat has reached a safe internal temperature. If fresh lamb has reached 160 °F throughout, even though it may still be pink in the center, it should be safe. The pink color can be due to the cooking method or added ingredients. For approximate cooking times of lamb refer to Table #2.

**Microwaving:** When microwaving unequal sizes of lamb, arrange in a dish or on a rack so thick parts are toward the outside of the dish and thin parts are in the center, and cook on medium-high or medium power. Place a roast in an oven-cooking bag or in a covered pot. Refer to the manufacturer's directions that accompany the microwave oven for suggested cooking times. Use a meat thermometer to test for doneness in several places to be sure the proper temperature as listed above has been reached.

### Serving

- Wash hands with soap and water before serving or eating food.
- Serve cooked products on clean plates with clean utensils and clean hands.
- Never put cooked foods on a dish that has held raw lamb unless the dish is washed with soap and hot water.
- Hold hot foods above 140 °F and cold foods below 40 °F.

- Never leave foods, raw or cooked, at room temperature longer than two hours. On a hot day with temperatures at 90 °F or warmer, this decreases to one hour.

### Leftovers

- Always use clean utensils and storage containers for safe storage.
- Divide large amounts of leftovers into small, shallow containers for quick cooling in the refrigerator and use within three or four days.
- Avoid placing large pots of stew or gravy in the refrigerator to cool since it will likely take until the next day for this amount of food to cool.
- Use stews and gravies within one to two days.
- For frozen storage, wrap meat in heavy foil, freezer wrap or place in a freezer container. For optimum taste, use meat within two to three months.
- When reheating leftovers, make sure that they have been cooked to 165 °F.
- If you may have kept the food refrigerated for too long, throw it out. Never taste food that looks or smells strange to see if you can still use it.

**Table 1. Safe Handling of Lamb in Cold Storage**

Food	Refrigerator (40 °F)	Freezer (0 °F)
<b>Fresh Lamb</b>		
Roast	3-5 Days	6-9 Months
Steak/Chops	3-5 Days	6-9 Months
Ground/Stew Meat	1-2 Days	3-4 Months
<b>Cooked Lamb</b>		
Roast	3-4 Days	2-3 Months
Steak/Chops	3-4 Days	2-3 Months
Ground/Stew Meat	1-2 Days	2-3 Months

**Table 2. Approximate\* Lamb Cooking Times (°F)**

Cuts of Lamb	Size	Cooking Methods	Cooking Times	Internal Temperature
Lamb leg, bone in	5 to 7 lbs.	Roast 325 °F	20 to 25 min./lb.	Medium-rare 145 °F
			25 to 30 min./lb.	Medium 160 °F
			30 to 35 min./lb.	Well-done 170 °F
Lamb leg, bone in	7 to 9 lbs.	Roast 325 °F	15 to 20 min./lb.	Medium-rare 145 °F
			20 to 25 min./lb.	Medium 160 °F
			25 to 30 min./lb.	Well-done 170 °F
Lamb leg, boneless, rolled	4 to 7 lbs.	Roast 325 °F	25 to 30 min./lb.	Medium-rare 145 °F
			30 to 35 min./lb.	Medium 160 °F
			35 to 40 min./lb.	Well-done 170 °F
Shoulder roast or Shank leg half	3 to 4 lbs.	Roast 325 °F	30 to 35 min./lb.	Medium-rare 145 °F
			40 to 45 min./lb.	Medium 160 °F
			45 to 50 min./lb.	Well-done 170 °F
Cubes, for kabobs	1 to 1 ½"	Broil/grill	8 to 12 minutes	Medium 160 °F
Ground lamb patties	2" thick	Broil/grill	5 to 8 minutes	Medium 160 °F
Chops. rib or loin	1½" to 1" thick	Broil/grill	7 to 11 minutes	Medium-rare 145 °F
			15 to 19 minutes	Medium 160 °F
Leg steaks	¾" thick	Broil/grill 4" From heat	14 to 18 minutes	Medium-rare 145 °F Medium 160 °F
Stew meat, pieces Shanks	1 to 1½" ¾ to 1 lb.	Cover with liquid; simmer	1½ to 2 hours	Medium 160 °F
Breast, rolled	1½ to 2 lb.	*Braise 325 °F	1½ to 2 hours	Medium 160 °F

\* Use a meat thermometer to check for proper doneness.

\*\* Braising is roasting or simmering less-tender meat with a small amount of liquid in a tightly covered pan.

**Source:**

USDA/FSIS (2006). *Focus on: Lamb from Farm to Table*. [http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact\\_Sheets/Lamb\\_from\\_Farm\\_to\\_Table/index.asp](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Lamb_from_Farm_to_Table/index.asp)

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This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Food Safety Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University. (New 04/99. Revised 01/07.)

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