Cooking Convenience Foods

The last time you popped a frozen pot pie in the microwave, did you read the cooking/reheating instructions? It is very easy to just throw these convenience meals in the microwave without taking the time to read how to properly cook them. Convenience foods can be purchased frozen, refrigerated, or right off the shelf. Because each food has different cooking requirements, it is imperative to read and follow the manufacturer’s cooking instructions. The majority of these foods are not ready to eat straight out of the package, and typically, some further cooking is required.

Not following label directions can lead to undercooked food, thus leading to foodborne illness. Follow the basic steps provided while cooking convenience foods to help reduce your risk of getting a foodborne illness. You might find that proper cooking requires a conventional, convection, or toaster oven and not a microwave. Instructions are specific to that product and may not be applicable to all ovens. Remember to stir, cover, and rotate foods to allow for even cooking.

Another important consideration in convenience foods is the microwave wattage. Do you know the wattage of your microwave? Wattage is found on the inside of the door or on the back side of the appliance. If your microwave’s wattage is lower than what is recommended on the instructions, it will more than likely take longer for your food to be cooked and reach its proper internal temperature. Typically, the higher wattage of a microwave you have, the less time it will take that food to reach its proper temperature.

Lastly, remember to use a food thermometer. After you have cooked the food, be sure to allow the food to “stand” for the allotted amount of time specified in the instructions. Stand time is important to allow the food to finish heating through or cooking. One cannot tell if a food is properly cooked based on color or texture alone. Using your food thermometer is the only sure way to tell if a food has reached its proper internal temperature. Most convenience foods need to reach an internal temperature of 165 °F. Remember to always read and follow the manufacturers’ guidelines when cooking or reheating convenience foods.

For more information on food safety, contact your local county AgriLife Extension agent [insert agent’s name here] at [insert contact information here], or visit this website: http://fightbac.org/storage/documents/Cook_It_Safe/CookItSafeBrochure.pdf.