

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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The Skinny on Pork

Those of us with more than a couple of decades of age probably remember when no one would ever think to put 'pork' and 'skinny' in the same sentence. Pork was always too fatty to be healthy - even though it sure tasted good! But times have changed, and so have pigs. Today's pigs are bred to be much leaner than their ancestors. In fact, some cuts of pork today are classified by USDA standards to be 'extra lean'. Some have fewer calories and less fat than the same amount of chicken breast, and all the common lean cuts of fresh pork have less fat than chicken thighs. So if you're tired of chicken breasts, you do have some options!

However, cutting out all the fat means that either we have to adjust our cooking, or we have to eat tough, dry pork. Fat in meat is what makes meat tender. Fat in between the strands of protein in muscle keep the proteins from shrinking and tightening into knots. A nicely marbled steak can be cooked on high heat and still be tender because of all that fatty marbling. Lean meat cannot.

Another difference in today's pork is that, thanks to changes in the feed and how pigs are raised, we no longer have to worry about trichinosis parasites. We used to always cook pork enough to kill them because they were so common. The rule was that it had to be brown the whole way through the middle. Not any more!

USDA has reviewed evidence that lower cooking temperatures will be enough to kill any bacteria that would commonly be present. And without parasites to worry about, the recommended temperature for cooking fresh pork has been reduced. It used to be 165° F, but now it is 145° F. We do need to leave the meat rest for 3 minutes after it gets to that temperature, to let the heat equalize inside. But it is still a lower temperature, and it causes less drying and shrinking than the old ways.

There are some exceptions to the 145° F. Ground fresh pork should be cooked to 160° F. Grinding the meat moved whatever bacteria were on the surface into the middle of the package, or the meatloaf, or the patty. So extra cooking is needed to be sure they're killed.

On the other hand, if you buy a fully cooked ham, you won't need to cook it quite as much. The first cooking took care of the majority of the bacteria. All you need to do now is reheat it. That only requires 140° F, just like other reheated foods. Or you could just eat it cold if you prefer!

How you get to the necessary 145° F depends on you, and on the cut of meat you have. Pork can be roasted, broiled, grilled, barbequed, braised, or slow-cooked. They all work, as long as the final temperature is hot enough. If you choose roasting, set the oven for at least 350° F. Below that it will take too long to get the meat hot enough. Bacteria could be growing and making toxins while the meat is heating. A loin roast will take between 15 and 20 minutes per pound at that temperature. Fresh ham should take less time, only about 15 min per pound.

Grilling or broiling chops is much quicker. The temperature is higher and the meat is thinner. So 8-9 minutes for thin, or 12-16 minutes for thick, chops is usually enough. Sautéing or braising cutlets or tenderloin medallions will be even faster - only 4 to 8 minutes. But with all of these, the important thing is to check the temperature with a thermometer. It's okay if it's still pink in the middle when the temperature reaches 145° F. Take the meat off the heat, leave it sit for 3 more minutes, then serve it up moist and tender.

If you try to cook today's pork the way Grandmother did, long and hard to kill the parasites and make it brown in the middle, you won't be happy. Without fat, lean pork can be shoe leather. Don't ruin your pork chops! Go buy a meat thermometer and get ready to enjoy some juicy tender meat.

Here's a super-quick Thai-inspired version of pork tenderloin to do on the grill. Serve on buns or with rice, with Oriental slaw or cucumber salad with a sprinkle of sesame seeds.

Grilled Thai Tenderloin

1 pork tenderloin	1 Tbsp minced garlic
1 Tbsp minced fresh gingerroot	2 ½ Tbsp soy sauce
1 ½ tsp garlic chili paste	1 Tbsp fresh mint, minced

Cut tenderloin crosswise into 1-inch pieces; flatten with heel of hand to about 1/8-inch thickness and place in shallow pan. Combine remaining ingredients and pour over pork cutlets; cover and refrigerate for up to four hours. Remove pork from marinade (discard remaining marinade) and grill over medium-hot coals just until nicely browned; about 2-3 minutes per side. Let rest 3 minutes.

Serve on sandwich buns if desired. Serves 4-5. Recipe courtesy of the National Pork Board.

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