

Definition of Terms

Ready-to-eat (RTE) products have received a **lethality** treatment. The lethality treatment, generally a cooking procedure, must be designed to eliminate pathogens, or harmful bacteria. This lethality treatment makes the product safe to eat by the consumer without additional preparation to achieve food safety, and we normally refer to these products as “ready-to-eat.”

Many RTE processes involve handling the product after it has been subject to an initial lethality treatment (**post-lethality exposure**). When the product is directly exposed to the environment it can become cross-contaminated. **Cross-contamination** is the transfer of bacteria and possibly pathogens to the exposed RTE product after the lethality treatment. These bacteria can come from the environment, from the employees, or from the equipment. They can be transferred directly, such as when an exposed RTE product is placed on a table top which has bacteria on it. Often they are transferred indirectly, such as when a pallet placed on the floor in the raw area is subsequently used in the RTE area, or when an employee handles a pallet and then touches exposed product.

Many RTE products are taken right from the package and consumed as they are, with little or no heat treatment. If any pathogens are present, they will be consumed along with the product. Thus the risk of these products producing foodborne illness is increased. Because of this, establishments producing these products have an increased responsibility for sanitation of the RTE processing environment.