Do you cook bacon in the oven or on the stove? What’s the best way to soften butter? We polled readers on hgtv.com. See the results and how the experts weighed in.

**Tell us your cooking habits**

Do you add olive oil to your pasta cooking water?

60% No
40% Yes

**The Expert Says** Water plus oil is a no-no. “Adding oil to pasta cooking water prevents sauce from adhering properly to the pasta,” says chef Lidia Bastianich, author of *Lidia’s Mastering the Art of Italian Cuisine*. Her rules for making perfect pasta: Drop 1 pound of pasta (a standard-size box) into about 6 quarts (24 cups) of heavily salted boiling water, and give it a stir. When the pasta is al dente—taste a piece to be sure—drain it, then toss it with olive oil or sauce.
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Do you clean your cast iron skillet with soap?

62% No  
38% Yes

**THE EXPERT SAYS** You’ve probably heard that cleaning a cast iron skillet with soap will remove the nonstick seasoning. But that’s not exactly true. “In a properly seasoned cast iron pan, one that has been rubbed with oil and heated repeatedly, the oil has already broken down into a substance that’s bonded to the surface of the metal,” says J. Kenji López-Alt, author of *The Food Lab* cookbook. So the soap won’t affect the coating that’s there. Not convinced? Even Lodge, a company that’s manufactured cast iron skillets for more than 100 years, says that mild soapy water is fine. Use a regular sponge (not steel wool), and don’t let the skillet soak in the sink. Dry it thoroughly by placing the pan back on the burner and heating it so the water evaporates. Then reseason it with oil.

Do you store onions in the refrigerator?

56% No  
44% Yes

**THE EXPERT SAYS** Usually the fridge keeps food fresh, but chilling onions shortens their shelf life, plus other foods will absorb their flavor. “Keep onions in a cool, dark place,” says Robert Schueller of Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, Inc., a national distributor of specialty produce. Moisture and light prompt onions to sprout, which makes them bitter. Storing onions in a cabinet is ideal (but on the counter is fine if it’s out of direct sunlight); they’ll keep for about a month.

You’re reheating food in a microwave-safe dish. What do you cover it with?

66% A paper towel  
20% Nothing  
14% Plastic wrap

**THE EXPERT SAYS** Covering food in the microwave doesn’t just prevent splatters; it also helps food heat evenly, which is important for killing bacteria, according to the USDA. Either a microwave-safe ceramic plate, placed slightly askew on top of what you’re heating so moisture can escape, or a white or unbleached paper towel is a great cover option. As for plastic wrap, the USDA says it’s OK to use it to cover food in the microwave as long as the wrap never touches the food.

Your hunk of cheddar cheese has some mold on the edge. What do you do?

65% Cut away the mold and use the rest  
35% Throw away the whole chunk

**THE EXPERT SAYS** The safest thing is to toss it. For the most part, the fungi that grow on cheese don’t produce dangerous toxins that can hurt you, but it is possible. Robert Buchanan, Ph.D., director of the University of Maryland Center for Food Safety and Security Systems, says to mind the axiom “When in doubt, throw it out.” If you must keep it, cut at least an inch away from the mold on all sides.

Where do you keep your coffee?

75% In a cabinet or on the counter  
14% In the refrigerator  
11% In the freezer

**THE EXPERT SAYS** Most of you are on the right track. The best way to keep coffee fresh is to store it in an airtight container at room temp. Anything that exposes coffee to moisture (like the fridge) can cause unpleasant flavors in your cup, says Wille Yli-Luoma of Heart Roasters cafes in Portland, OR. One exception: You can freeze whole beans in a vacuum-sealed foil bag for up to a year.
Do you use plastic containers to reheat food in the microwave?

**55%**  
Yes  

**45%**  
No  

**THE EXPERT SAYS** Whether it’s safe to do so depends on the type of plastic. Some plastic containers are OK for microwave use (check the bottom of the container or the packaging label when you purchase). But frozen-food trays are meant to go in the microwave only once, so don’t reheat them. Most takeout containers and those that held other food (such as used butter tubs) should never go in the microwave. And even if the container you have was sold as microwave-safe, Harvard Medical School recommends tossing it if it’s cracked or scratched because it may leach chemicals into your food.

Do you peel carrots before cutting them?

**71%**  
Yes  

**29%**  
No  

**THE EXPERT SAYS** It’s a habit to reach for the peeler, but food writer Alison Roman says that carrots are better unpeeled—really. “Skin on!” she says. “I love the rustic look they get when roasted, and when shaved thin for salads, you'll never notice they aren’t peeled. Leaving the skin on gives an earthiness that I welcome.” Just be sure to scrub your carrots well.

Do you rewash prewashed greens before using them in a salad?

**66%**  
No  

**34%**  
Yes  

**THE EXPERT SAYS** Go ahead and dump that lettuce right in your salad bowl. The California Department of Public Health says that if a package of greens is clearly labeled washed, it’s pointless to rinse them again—they’re probably perfectly clean. And if there are harmful bacteria hiding in that baby arugula, they’ve already survived a commercial wash, so you’re very unlikely to kill them off in your sink at home.

When you’re making burgers on the stove top, do you flatten them as they cook?

**58%**  
No  

**42%**  
Yes  

**THE EXPERT SAYS** In short, you shouldn’t press down on your burger as it cooks. Doing so results in a burger that’s dense and dry, says cookbook author J. Kenji López-Alt. There’s one exception, though: the smashed burger. That’s a crisp, very thin burger, like the kind made at some fast food places. To make one of those, put a small patty into a very hot, dry skillet, and immediately smash it with a spatula. But for any other kind of burger, resist the urge to squash the patty. You’ll squeeze out its delicious juices.

Do you rinse raw chicken under running water before cooking it?

**56%**  
No  

**44%**  
Yes  

**THE EXPERT SAYS** People don’t usually get sick from eating chicken—after all, you’re not digging into a medium-rare thigh or breast. Instead, most poultry-related illnesses are caused by cross-contamination, says Robert Buchanan, Ph.D. When you rinse chicken under the kitchen faucet, even if you’re really careful, you’re likely to contaminate the sink. “Then, if you wash vegetables for a salad, for example, those vegetables could pick up the pathogens,” Buchanan says. Even worse? Placing chicken under a hard spray of water, which could spread bacteria all around. The safest plan is to put the chicken directly in the skillet or baking dish, or right on the grill, and cook it thoroughly.
How do you cook bacon?

63% On the stove top
22% In the oven
15% In the microwave

THE EXPERT SAYS The crispiest, most golden-brown bacon is made on the stove top. When cooking bacon, you’re trying to do two things, says Katherine Alford, senior vice president of culinary at Food Network: “You want to render some of the fat, and then crisp the bacon,” she says. The stove top is ideal for that. First bring strips of bacon to room temperature, then place them in a cold skillet. Turn the heat to medium, and cook the bacon in its own fat, flipping it occasionally, until it’s done to your liking. But if you’re preparing bacon for a crowd, make your life easier by cooking a big batch in the oven. Lay strips on a wire rack, and place the rack on a baking sheet. Put the baking sheet in a cold oven, turn the heat to 400˚F, and bake 15 to 20 minutes.

What’s your method for hard-boiling eggs?

62% Start by putting the eggs in a pot of cold water
38% Wait for the water to boil, then add the eggs

THE EXPERT SAYS The most foolproof way to get perfect hard-boiled eggs is to start them in cold water. That way the whites will cook slowly as the water comes up to a boil. When you add eggs to boiling water, the whites can overcook before the yolks are done. In his book Egg, Michael Ruhlman says to put eggs in a pot, and add enough cold water to cover them by an inch. Then bring the water to a boil, cover the pan, remove it from the heat, and let it sit for 15 minutes. Finally, drop the eggs into a bowl of ice water to prevent overcooking (and that green ring around the yolk).

When you’re baking a potato, do you pierce it with a fork first?

76% Yes
24% No

THE EXPERT SAYS Most of us believe that piercing potatoes before baking them prevents them from exploding in the oven. Not so fast, says chef Bruce Weinstein, coauthor of The Ultimate Potato Book. “I do not like to futz with a baked potato—no piercing and no wrapping,” he says. “In 40 years of cooking, I have had a potato explode on me only once, and that was when I squeezed it to see if it was done.” Plus, Weinstein says, an unperforated baked potato is actually more delicious—the moisture stays inside, resulting in tender flesh and crunchy skin.

How do you soften butter for baking?

71% Let it sit at room temperature
29% Microwave it for a few seconds

THE EXPERT SAYS Congratulations—most of you are already baking like a pro. “I prefer to allow butter to come to a workable texture by leaving it on the counter,” says Dorie Greenspan, author of the forthcoming book Dorie’s Cookies. That’s because using the microwave is iffy. Butter goes from cold and firm to oily and melted (not what you want) in seconds. But Greenspan does have a butter-softening shortcut. Unwrap a stick of butter, and bash it with a rolling pin until it’s malleable. It’s fine for the butter to be slightly cool when you start cooking.

in the kitchen