Kashrut: Jewish Dietary Laws (from JewishFAQ.org)

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Kashrut is the body of Jewish law dealing with what foods we can and cannot eat and how those foods must be prepared and eaten. "Kashrut" comes from the Hebrew root Kaf-Shin-Resh, meaning fit, proper or correct. It is the same root as the more commonly known word "kosher," which describes food that meets these standards. The word "kosher" can also be used, and often is used, to describe ritual objects that are made in accordance with Jewish law and are fit for ritual use.

There is no such thing as "kosher-style" food. Kosher is not a style of cooking. Chinese food can be kosher if it is prepared in accordance with Jewish law, and there are many fine kosher Chinese restaurants in Philadelphia and New York. Traditional Ashkenazic Jewish foods like knishes, bagels, blintzes, and matzah ball soup can all be non-kosher if not prepared in accordance with Jewish law. When a restaurant calls itself "kosher-style," it usually means that the restaurant serves these traditional Jewish foods, and it almost invariably means that the food is not actually kosher.

Food that is not kosher is commonly referred to as treyf (lit. torn, from the commandment not to eat animals that have been torn by other animals).

Why Do We Observe the Laws of Kashrut?

Many modern Jews think that the laws of kashrut are simply primitive health regulations that have become obsolete with modern methods of food preparation. There is no question that some of the dietary laws have some beneficial health effects. For example, the laws regarding kosher slaughter are so sanitary that kosher butchers and slaughterhouses have been exempted from many USDA regulations.

However, health is not the only reason for Jewish dietary laws. Many of the laws of kashrut have no known connection with health. To the best of our modern scientific knowledge, there is no reason why camel or rabbit meat (both treyf) is any less healthy than cow or goat meat. In addition, some of the health benefits to be derived from kashrut were not made obsolete by the refrigerator. For example, there is some evidence that eating meat and dairy together interferes with digestion, and no modern food preparation technique reproduces the health benefit of the kosher law of eating them separately.

In recent years, several secular sources that have seriously looked into this matter have acknowledged that health does not explain these prohibitions. Some have suggested that the prohibitions are instead derived from environmental considerations. For example, a camel (which is not kosher) is more useful as a beast of burden than as a source of food. In the Middle Eastern climate, the pig consumes a quantity of food that is disproportional to its value as a food source. But again, these are not reasons that come from Jewish tradition.

The short answer to why Jews observe these laws is: because the Torah says so. The Torah does not specify any reason for these laws, and for a Torah-observant, traditional Jew, there is no need for any other reason. Some have suggested that the laws of kashrut fall into the category of "chukkim," laws for which there is no reason. We show our obedience to G-d by following these laws even though we do not know the reason. Others, however, have tried to ascertain G-d's reason for imposing these laws.

In his book "To Be a Jew" (an excellent resource on traditional Judaism), Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin suggests that the dietary laws are designed as a call to holiness. The ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, pure and defiled, the sacred and the profane, is very important in Judaism. Imposing rules on what you can and cannot eat ingrains that kind of self control, requiring us to learn to control even our most basic, primal instincts.

Donin also points out that the laws of kashrut elevate the simple act of eating into a religious ritual. The Jewish dinner table is often compared to the Temple altar in rabbinic literature. A Jew who observes the laws of kashrut cannot eat a meal without being reminded of the fact that he is a Jew,

How Difficult is it to Keep Kosher?

People who do not keep kosher often tell me how difficult it is. Actually, keeping kosher is not particularly difficult in and of itself; what makes it difficult to keep kosher is the fact that the rest of the world does not do so.

As we shall see below, the basic underlying rules are fairly simple. If you buy your meat at a kosher butcher and buy only kosher certified products at the market, the only thing you need to think about is the separation of meat and dairy.

Keeping kosher only becomes difficult when you try to eat in a non-kosher restaurant, or at the home of a person who does not keep kosher.

General Rules

Although the details of kashrut are extensive, the laws all derive from a few fairly simple, straightforward rules:

1. Certain animals may not be eaten at all. This restriction includes the flesh, organs, eggs and milk of the forbidden animals.
2. Of the animals that may be eaten, the birds and mammals must be killed in accordance with Jewish law.
3. All blood must be drained from the meat or broiled out of it before it is eaten.
4. Certain parts of permitted animals may not be eaten.
5. Meat (the flesh of birds and mammals) cannot be eaten with dairy. Fish, eggs, fruits, vegetables and grains can be eaten with either meat or dairy. (According to some views, fish may not be eaten with meat).

6. Utensils that have come into contact with meat may not be used with dairy, and vice versa. Utensils that have come into contact with non-kosher food may not be used with kosher food. This applies only where the contact occurred while the food was hot.
7. Grape products made by non-Jews may not be eaten.

The Details

Animals that may not be eaten

Of the "beasts of the earth" (which basically refers to land mammals with the exception of swarming rodents), you may eat any animal that has cloven hooves and chews its cud. Lev. 11:3; Deut. 14:6. Any land mammal that does not have both of these qualities is forbidden. The Torah specifies that the camel, the rock badger, the hare and the pig are not kosher because each lacks one of these two qualifications. Sheep, cattle, goats and deer are kosher.

Of the things that are in the waters, you may eat anything that has fins and scales. Lev. 11:9; Deut. 14:9. Thus, shellfish such as lobsters, oysters, shrimp, clams and crabs are all forbidden. Fish like tuna, carp, salmon and herring are all permitted.

For birds, the criteria is less clear. The Torah lists forbidden birds (Lev. 11:13-19; Deut. 14:11-18), but does not specify why these particular birds are forbidden. All of the birds on the list are birds of prey or scavengers, thus the rabbis inferred that this was the basis for the distinction. Other birds are permitted, such as chicken, geese, ducks and turkeys.

Of the "winged swarming things" (winged insects), a few are specifically permitted (Lev. 11:22), but the Sages are no longer certain which ones they are, so all have been forbidden.

Rodents, reptiles, amphibians, and insects (except as mentioned above) are all forbidden. Lev. 11:29-30, 42-43.

Some authorities require a post-mortem examination of the lungs of cattle, to determine whether the lungs are free from adhesions. If the lungs are free from such adhesions, the animal is deemed "glatt" (that is, "smooth"). In certain circumstances, an animal can be kosher without being glatt; however, the stringency of keeping "glatt kosher" has become increasingly common in recent years.

As mentioned above, any product derived from these forbidden animals, such as their milk, eggs, fat, or organs, also cannot be eaten. Rennet, an enzyme used to harden cheese, is often obtained from non-kosher animals, thus kosher hard cheese can be difficult to find.

Kosher slaughtering

The mammals and birds that may be eaten must be slaughtered in accordance with Jewish law. (Deut. 12:21). We may not eat animals that died of natural causes (Deut. 14:21) or that were killed by other animals. In addition, the animal must have no disease or flaws in the organs at the time of slaughter. These restrictions do not apply to fish; only to the flocks and herds (Num. 11:22).

Ritual slaughter is known as shechitah, and the person who performs the slaughter is called a shochet, both from the Hebrew root Shin-Chet-Tav, meaning to destroy or kill. The method of slaughter is a quick, deep stroke across the throat with a perfectly sharp blade with no nicks or unevenness. This method is painless, causes unconsciousness within two seconds, and is widely recognized as the most humane method of slaughter possible.

Another advantage of shechitah is that ensures rapid, complete draining of the blood, which is also necessary to render the meat kosher.

The shochet is not simply a butcher; he must be a pious man, well-trained in Jewish law, particularly as it relates to kashrut. In smaller, more remote communities, the rabbi and the shochet were often the same person.

Draining of Blood

The Torah prohibits consumption of blood. Lev. 7:26-27; Lev. 17:10-14. This is the only dietary law that has a reason specified in Torah: we do not eat blood because the life of the animal is contained in the blood. This applies only to the blood of birds and mammals, not to fish blood. Thus, it is necessary to remove all blood from the flesh of kosher animals.

The first step in this process occurs at the time of slaughter. As discussed above, shechitah allows for rapid draining of most of the blood.

The remaining blood must be removed, either by broiling or soaking and salting. Liver may only be kashered by the broiling method, because it has so much blood in it and such complex blood vessels. This final process must be completed within 72 hours after slaughter, and before the meat is frozen or ground. Most butchers and all frozen food vendors take care of the soaking and salting for you, but you should always check this when you are buying someplace you are unfamiliar with.

An egg that contains a blood spot may not be eaten. This isn't very common, but I find them once in a while. It is a good idea to break an egg into a container and check it before you put it into a heated pan, because if you put a blood-stained egg into a heated pan, the pan becomes non-kosher.

Forbidden Fats and Nerves

The sciatic nerve and its adjoining blood vessels may not be eaten. The process of removing this nerve is time consuming and not cost-effective, so most American slaughterers simply sell the hind quarters to non-kosher butchers.

A certain kind of fat, known as chelev, which surrounds the vital organs and the liver, may not be eaten. Kosher butchers remove this. Modern scientists have found biochemical differences between this type of fat and the permissible fat around the muscles and under the skin.

Separation of Meat and Dairy

On three separate occasions, the Torah tells us not to "boil a kid in its mother's milk." (Ex. 23:19; Ex. 34:26; Deut. 14:21). The Oral Torah explains that this passage prohibits eating meat and dairy together. The rabbis extended this prohibition to include not eating milk and poultry together. In addition, the Talmud prohibits cooking meat and fish together or serving them on the same plates, because it is considered to be unhealthy. It is, however, permissible to eat fish and dairy together, and it is quite common. It is also permissible to eat dairy and eggs together.

This separation includes not only the foods themselves, but the utensils, pots and pans with which they are cooked, the plates and flatware from which they are eaten, the dishwashers or dishpans in which they are cleaned, and the towels on which they are dried. A kosher household will have at least two sets of pots, pans and dishes: one for meat and one for dairy. See Utensils below for more details.

One must wait a significant amount of time between eating meat and dairy. Opinions differ, and vary from three to six hours. This is because fatty residues and meat particles tend to cling to the mouth. From dairy to meat, however, one need only rinse one's mouth and eat a neutral solid like bread, unless the dairy product in question is also of a type that tends to stick in the mouth.

The Yiddish words fleishig (meat), milchig (dairy) and pareve (neutral) are commonly used to describe food or utensils that fall into one of those categories.

Note that even the smallest quantity of dairy (or meat) in something renders it entirely dairy (or meat) for purposes of kashrut. For example, most margarines are dairy for kosher purposes, because they contain a small quantity of whey or other dairy products to give it a dairy-like taste. Animal fat is considered meat for purposes of kashrut. You should read the ingredients very carefully, even if the product is kosher-certified.

Utensils

Utensils (pots, pans, plates, flatware, etc., etc.) must also be kosher. A utensil picks up the kosher "status" (meat, dairy, pareve, or treyf) of the food that is cooked in it or eaten off of it, and transmits that status back to the next food that is cooked in it or eaten off of it. Thus, if you cook chicken soup in a saucepan, the pan becomes meat. If you thereafter use the same saucepan to heat up some warm milk, the fleishig status of the pan is transmitted to the milk, and the milchig status of the milk is transmitted to the pan, making both the pan and the milk a forbidden mixture.

Kosher status can be transmitted from the food to the utensil or from the utensil to the food only in the presence of heat, thus if you are eating cold food in a non-kosher establishment, the condition of the plates is not an issue. Likewise, you could use the same knife to slice cold cuts and cheese, as long as you clean it in between, but this is not really a recommended procedure, because it increases the likelihood of mistakes.

Stove tops and sinks routinely become non-kosher utensils, because they routinely come in contact with both meat and dairy in the presence of heat. It is necessary, therefore, to use dishpans when cleaning dishes (don't soak them directly in the sink) and to use separate spoon rests and trivets when putting things down on the stove top.

Dishwashers are a kashrut problem. If you are going to use a dishwasher in a kosher home, you either need to have separate dish racks or you need to run the dishwasher in between meat and dairy loads.

You should use separate towels and pot holders for meat and dairy. Routine laundering kashers such items, so you can simply launder them between using them for meat and dairy.

Certain kinds of utensils can be "kashered" if you make a mistake and use it with both meat and dairy. Consult a rabbi for guidance if this situation occurs.

Grape Products

The restrictions on grape products derive from the laws against using products of idolatry. Wine was commonly used in the rituals of all ancient religions, and wine was routinely sanctified for pagan purposes while it was being processed. For this reason, use of wines and other grape products made by non-Jews was prohibited. (Whole grapes are not a problem, nor are whole grapes in fruit cocktail).

For the most part, this rule only affects wine and grape juice. This becomes a concern with many fruit drinks or fruit-flavored drinks, which are often sweetened with grape juice. You may also notice that some baking powders are not kosher, because baking powder is sometimes made with cream of tartar, a by-product of wine making.

Kashrut Certification 

The task of keeping kosher is greatly simplified by widespread kashrut certification. Products that have been certified as kosher are labeled with a mark called a hekhsher (from the same Hebrew root as the word "kosher") that ordinarily identifies the rabbi or organization that certified the product. Approximately 3/4 of all prepackaged foods have some kind of kosher certification, and most major brands have reliable Orthodox certification.

The symbols at right are all widely-accepted hekhshers commonly found on products throughout the United States. These symbols are registered tradmarks of kosher certification organizations, and cannot be placed on a food label without the organization's permission. With a little practice, it is very easy to spot these hekhshers on food labels, usually near the product name, occasionally near the list of ingredients. There are many other certifications available, of varying degrees of strictness.

The most controversial certification is the K, a plain letter K found on products asserted to be kosher. A letter of the alphabet cannot be trademarked, so any manufacturer can put a K on a product. For example, Jell-O brand gelatin puts a K on its product, even though every reliable Orthodox authority agrees that Jell-O is not kosher. Most other kosher certification marks are trademarked and cannot be used without the permission of the certifying organization. The certifying organization assures you that the product is kosher according to their standards, but standards vary.

It is becoming increasingly common for kosher certifying organizations to indicate whether the product is fleishig (meat), milchig (dairy) or pareve (neutral). If the product is dairy, it will frequently have a D or the word Dairy next to the kashrut symbol. If it is meat, the word Meat or an M may appear near the symbol. If it is pareve, the word Pareve (or Parev) may appear near the symbol (Not a P! That means kosher for Passover!). If no such clarification appears, you should read the ingredient list carefully to determine whether the product is meat, dairy or pareve.

Kosher certification organizations charge manufacturers a small fee for kosher certification. This fee covers the expenses of researching the ingredients in the product and inspecting the facilities used to manufacture the product. There are some who have complained that these certification costs increase the cost of the products to non-Jewish, non-kosher consumers; however, the actual cost of such certification is so small relative to the overall cost of production that most manufacturers cannot even calculate it. The cost is more than justified by the increase in sales it produces: although observant Jews are only a small fragment of the marketplace, kosher certification is also relied upon by many Muslims, vegetarians (although this is not fool-proof; dairy and parev foods may contain eggs or fish; but if it isn't kosher, it probably isn't vegetarian), some Seventh Day Adventists, as well as many other people who simply think that kosher products are cleaner, healthier or better than non-kosher products.

Do All Jews Keep Kosher?

About 25% to 30% of Jews in America keep kosher to one extent or another. This includes the vast majority of people who identify themselves as Orthodox, as well as many Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews and some Reform Jews.

However, the standards that are observed vary substantially from one person to another. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), only about 17% of Jewish families eat kosher meat all the time. See Table 28. Others keep kosher more strictly some times than others.

The strictest people will eat only foods that have reliable Orthodox kosher certification, eating only glatt-kosher certified meats and specially certified dairy products. They will not eat cooked food in a restaurant unless the restaurant has reliable Orthodox certification, and they are unlikely to accept an invitation to dinner from anyone who is not known to share their high standards.

Others are more lenient. Some will "ingredients read," accepting grocery store items that do not contain any identifiably non-kosher ingredients. Some will eat cooked food in a restaurant or a non-kosher home, as long as the meal is either vegetarian or uses only kosher meat and no dairy products. Some will eat non-kosher meat in restaurants, but only if the meat comes from a kosher animal and is not served with dairy products. Many of these more lenient people keep stricter standards in their homes than they do in restaurants or in other people's homes.

Reform Judaism and Kashrut:

Those Reform Jews who observe the dietary laws, totally or in part, seem to do so because (a) it adds to their personal expression of Judaism; the daily meals serve as reminders of Jewish ideals; (b) it provides an additional link with other Jews and a link to history; it enables Jews of all groups to eat in their home or their synagogue; (c) it encourages ethical discipline; a large number of Reform Jews observe a modified form of the dietary laws by abstaining from pork products, animals specifically prohibited, seafood, and the mixing of meat and milk. Some form of dietary observance may be carried out as a daily reminder of Judaism; the form may be left to the individual or congregation. "One might opt to eat only *kosher* meat or even to adopt some form of vegetarianism so as to avoid the necessity of taking a life. (This would be in consonance with the principle of *tsa-ar baalei chayim*--prevention of cruelty to animals.) The range of options available to the Reform Jew is from full observance of the Biblical and Rabbinic regulations to total non-observance. Reform Judaism does not take an 'all or nothing' approach" (*Gates of Mitzvah,* p. 132).