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Is the “Five-Second Rule” Real?

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Most people know the “five-second rule”: the idea that if food that’s fallen on the floor has been there less than five seconds, it’s still acceptable to eat. No one knows the origins of this questionable rule — and plenty of people think it’s kind of gross — but that hasn't stopped anyone from picking up a dropped Oreo and shouting “five-second rule!” before.

Though its origins may be murky, actual scientists have devoted time and resources to testing the five-second rule. And surprisingly, it’s not an entirely bogus theory — depending on the cleanliness of the floor.

To be clear, no scientist has gone on record recommending that you eat dropped food. However, a science [experiment conducted](#) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign proved that as long as the food was picked up within the five-second time limit, the presence of microorganisms on the dropped food was minimal. However, the experiment was conducted after first sanitizing the flooring, and it only applied to hard flooring like tile and wood, which are less likely to serve as an incubator for pathogens. No testing was conducted on carpeting and other soft surfaces, which can hold moisture and become breeding grounds for bacteria.

Let’s cut to the chase: It’s definitely not recommended to blindly follow the five-second rule. You have no way of knowing which pathogens are on your floor, so unless you regularly disinfect, it’s best to play it safe. [According to the experts](#), dry foods are slightly safer than wet ones because moisture is a great medium for pathogens to attach themselves. So, a potato chip or cracker might acquire a minimal pathogen transfer whereas an apple or slice of banana might test positive for a higher pathogen count. But we recommend a new rule: ***When in doubt, throw it out.***