

Summertime Food Safety

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Ahhhh. Summer is finally here. Warm weather, blue skies, family picnics and food borne illnesses. What? You don't want that last one? Neither do I. However, we have statistics that indicate an increase in cases of food borne illness during the summer months each year.

Let's explore the reasons for more people getting sick from the food they eat. Number 1—Bacteria multiply to unsafe levels in your food when it is warm. Number 2—Summer provides lots of opportunities to share time and food with others. We enjoy cookouts, potlucks, family reunions, family visits to far-flung relatives, etc. Number 3—The food we often eat at family and summer gatherings, chicken and ground beef, are more likely to support the rapid growth of microorganisms that can make you sick. Number 4—We often aren't careful about handling food that can make people sick—again the chicken and ground beef. Number 5—We can't see, smell or taste when food is going to make you sick.

What can we do to make sure we don't get one of the 48 million cases of food borne illness that we see here in the US each year? Consider the following ideas.

The basic food safety adage has long been "Keep Hot Food Hot, Keep Cold Food Cold, Keep Everything Clean and Separated and When in Doubt, Throw it Out." This bit of advice is as reliable today as it ever was. When it's 90°F outside, bacteria can double every 15 minutes, so one bacteria can become hundreds, thousands or millions very quickly. If you are traveling with protein foods be sure to keep them cold.

Once you arrive, keep food out of the sun in a cooler with plenty of ice. When it's time to cook the meal, wash your hands and use tongs to put the food on the grill. The best way to tell if food is cooked is to use a food thermometer. The USDA recommends that you cook ground meat to 160°F and chicken to 165°F. (no--looking at the color of juices isn't enough). Once cooked, use a clean plate to take food off the grill. Be sure to put any food you don't eat back in the cooler and when you get back home, put all uneaten food into a cold fridge.

Make sure that any food that can spoil (meats, salads, cheese and milk products) are kept cold at all times. Your fridge should be held at 40°F to keep your food cold enough. If you are not sure of the temperature, place your thermometer in the fridge and check the temperature after ten minutes. If it doesn't read 40°F, turn up the dial until that temperature remains constant.

Make sure you clean any cooking tools you have used, and also the inside of the cooler. Refreeze your ice packs for your next trip.

These suggestions probably aren't much different from what you already do, but a little attention to detail, keeping everything clean, and using a thermometer can make a big difference in keeping your food safe to eat. It's certainly no fun to get sick when you want to be spending time with your family.

If you are unsure about whether what you want to eat is safe there are lots of resources that can help you. UNH Cooperative Extension has a toll-free information line staffed by trained volunteers who can answer your food safety and food preservation questions. They can be reached, from within NH, at 1-877-398-4769. The federal government also has several options for you to get reliable food safety information. USDA educators staff the Meat & Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-5841 between 10:00am and 4:00pm each day. You can also email your questions to mp hotline.fsis@usda.gov . The Center for Disease Control also has food safety information at cdcinfo@cdc.gov.

You don't want to be the person who brings salmonella or e. coli to the summer picnic, so, follow the simple rules of "Clean, Separate, Cook & Chill" and you'll be famous for your delicious salad!