

GETTING TO THE ROOT OF COMMON FOOD SAFETY MYTHS

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When you go grocery shopping, you carefully check the condition of the produce, packaged foods and the contents of the meat and dairy coolers to find foods you think are freshest and safest to eat. But all foods - regardless of the way they were produced -- need to be handled and stored properly to prevent the growth of harmful bacteria that can cause foodborne illness, according to the non-profit Partnership for Food Safety Education.

September is National Food Safety Education Month and UNH Cooperative Extension is joining with the non-profit Partnership for Food Safety Education (PFSE) to introduce "Food Safety Mythbusters" to consumers.

The four myths are presented with the facts consumers need to know to help reduce their risk of foodborne illness:

- **Myth: Freezing foods kills harmful bacteria that can cause food poisoning.**

Fact: Bacteria can survive freezing temperatures. Freezing is not a method for making foods safe to eat. When food is thawed, bacteria can still be present and may begin to multiply. Cooking food to the proper internal temperature is the best way to kill harmful bacteria. Use a thermometer to measure the temperature of cooked foods and check this handout to view the current recommended cooking temperatures for meats.

http://fightbac.org/storage/documents/flyers/cook_fightbac_factsheet_2010_color.pdf

- **Myth: I eat a vegetarian diet, so I don't have to worry about food poisoning.**

Fact: Fruits and vegetables are an important part of a healthy diet, but like other foods they may carry a risk of foodborne illness. Always rinse produce under running tap water, including fruits and vegetables with skins and rinds that are not eaten. Never use detergent or bleach to wash fresh fruits or vegetables as these products are not intended for consumption. Packaged fruits and vegetables labeled "ready-to-eat" or "washed" do not need to be re-washed.

- **Myth: Plastic or glass cutting boards don't hold harmful bacteria on their surfaces like wooden cutting boards do.**

Fact: Any type of cutting board can hold harmful bacteria on its surface. Regardless of the type of cutting board you use, it should be washed and sanitized after each use. You can make your own sanitizer solution by mixing one teaspoon of household bleach and one quart of water in a spray bottle. Once you have washed your cutting boards with hot soapy water, rinse, then spray your bleach solution. Let air dry. If you have one, put your cutting boards into the dishwasher and run a regular cycle. Solid plastic, tempered glass, sealed granite, and hardwood cutting boards are dishwasher safe. However, wood laminates don't hold up well in the dishwasher. Once cutting boards of any type become excessively worn or develop hard-to-clean grooves, they should be discarded.

- **Myth: Locally-grown, organic foods will never give me food poisoning.**

Fact: Any food, whether organic or conventional grown, could become unsafe with illness-causing foodborne bacteria at any point during the chain from the farm to the table. Consumers in their homes can take action to keep their families safe. That is why it is important to reduce your risk of foodborne illness by practicing the four steps: Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill. Also, if you buy your produce from a local farmer's market, ask a few questions about how they keep their food safe from planting, to harvest to sales.

The Partnership introduced the Home Food Safety Mythbusters series in September, 2009, as part of its outreach to consumers, food safety educators and the media on the importance of safe food handling to good health. "The Partnership wants all consumers— regardless of their dietary choices -- to feel confident that they're informed on the risks of foodborne illness, and prepared to protect themselves by handling and preparing food safely." said Shelley Feist, the Partnership's Executive Director.

UNH Cooperative Extension is a contributing member of the Partnership for Food Safety Education which created the Fight BAC!® consumer food safety education campaign. "Food safety is a high priority for us" said Extension Educator Deb Maes. "By participating with the Partnership on Mythbusters, we help remind people during Food Safety Education Month how to make food safety a priority at home."

Across the state, Extension Educators train food service workers about keeping food safe. Also, through educational classes and social media these educators continually remind consumers that we all have a responsibility to make sure our food safe for ourselves and our family.

If you have a question about food safety, contact Extension's Info Line (1-877-398-4769) staffed by trained volunteers who can help you make informed decisions about the safety of your food.

Deb Maes teaches food safety classes throughout the year. At home she uses a tip-sensitive thermometer to check the temperature of her cooked meat and a separate thermometer to monitor her fridge (41°F) and freezer (0°F).