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How Do I Keep My Food Safe During Summer Outings?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Do I Keep My Food Safe During Summer Outings?

Georgia Lauritzen answers:*

It is estimated that one third of the U.S. population has at least one episode of food poisoning every year. Symptoms include nausea, abdominal cramps, headaches, vomiting and diarrhea and often go mis-diagnosed since they are also common to other illnesses. The incidence of food poisoning appears to be greater this time of year when the weather is warm and food is often transported. To prevent food poisoning, consider these tips.

- Temperature control is a simple way to keep food safe. Harmful microbes grow best at temperatures in the range of 40 - 140 degrees. Refrigeration temperatures of 40 degrees or lower and cooking temperatures of 140 and above control microbial growth. A general rule to follow is the two-hour rule, which is that no food be kept in the range of 40 - 140 degrees for longer than two hours before eating it. That time includes preparation, transporting and serving.
- For occasions when food is transported and out of the refrigerator for more than two hours, use a cooler or ice chest. Foods should be thoroughly chilled before putting them in the cooler. If a cooler is not available, choose foods that last without refrigeration such as fresh fruits and vegetables, dried meat or canned spreads, hard cheese, crackers and breads.
- Foods high in protein such as meat, fish, poultry, and dairy foods can be likely sources of food poisoning. Foods which are handled a lot can be contaminated by contact with kitchen equipment, surfaces and food handlers and can be likely sources of food poisoning. These should be avoided for picnics. One item which is often needlessly avoided is mayonnaise. Because of the high acidity content from vinegar, microbe growth is actually reduced. If kept within the two-hour rule, it is fine for outings.

* Georgia Lauritzen is Utah State University Extension Nutrition Specialist