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How Do I Keep Bacteria Out Of My Food Preparation Areas?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Do I Keep Bacteria Out Of My Food Preparation Areas?

Charlotte Brennand answers:*

As you prepare food for holiday gatherings, be careful that dangerous microorganisms don't show up and ruin the party. Microorganisms can appear any time of the year, but can be more prevalent now with the preparation of turkeys and other meats. Consider these tips to help keep your food preparation areas free from contamination.

- Use caution when wiping counters with dish cloths and sponges. Paper towels which are only used once present less of a problem. A dish cloth used for wiping raw turkey juice off the counter can have the potential for both spreading and supporting salmonella growth. When left to sit at room temperature, microorganisms present in the cloth can multiply since they have both moisture and food juices. The counter will not grow salmonella, but can still have traces left on it. Cross contamination, where the microorganisms are transferred from one source to another, can now occur if other food items are placed on what may look like a clean counter.
- Prevent surface contamination by dipping the dish cloth or sponge in a solution of approximately one tablespoon chlorine per gallon of water before wiping up food items from the counter that have the potential to contaminate. Such items are juices from meats, fish, poultry or raw eggs. Also change your dish cloths daily to reduce the potential for microbial growth. In addition, boiling works well to kill germs, and items such as scrub brushes, basters and other dishwasher-proof kitchen gadgets can be decontaminated by placing them in the dishwasher on sani-wash.
- Air dry your dishes when you can. Though your mother-in-law may not approve, this reduces the chances of bacteria being transferred from a potentially unclean towel to dishes. If she does win out, however, be sure to use a clean towel, and change it daily. When hand washing dishes, use caution when dishes are left to soak. Food material in the wash water can provide nutrients for microbial growth.
- Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently. This may sound obvious, but hands can have a surprising ability to transfer germs. Warm water is recommended because oils come off the skin easier, and people tend to wash longer than with cold water. A 20-second wash is recommended. Be especially thorough on fingertips, under nails, between the fingers and include wrists. Anti-bacterial soap can help, but is only about five percent more effective than regular soap.

* Charlotte Brennand is Utah State University Extension Food Safety Specialist

