Utah State University
DigitalCommons@USU

All Archived Publications | Archived USU Extension Publications

1-1-2002

How Do I Keep My Family From Getting Sick From Food Poisoning?

Charlotte Brennand

Warning: The information in this series may be obsolete. It is presented here for historical purposes only. For the most up to date information please visit The Utah State University Cooperative Extension Office

Recommended Citation
Brennand, Charlotte, "How Do I Keep My Family From Getting Sick From Food Poisoning?" (2002). *All Archived Publications.* Paper 346.
http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/extension_histall/346

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archived USU Extension Publications at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Archived Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.

Utah State University Extension
electronic publishing

ask A Specialist

A weekly question/answer column

How Do I Keep My Family From Getting Sick From Food Poisoning?

Charlotte Brennand answers:*

Even when we know better, it is easy to make mistakes in handling food. For food safety in general: don't be paranoid, but do be aware. Here are five general rules to help keep your family safe.

Rule 1. Keep everything clean. Thoroughly wash your hands with warm water and soap (lather for 20 seconds), rinse and dry, before beginning to cook and every time your hands may become contaminated. This includes after handling raw meat, taking care of a child, petting the dog, blowing your nose, going to the bathroom, answering the phone and even wiping a sweaty brow.

- Turn off the water with a paper towel to avoid touching the facets that were turned on with the dirty hands. Some faucets can be turned off by hitting the lever with an elbow.
- Teach children to wash their hands before handling food.
- Cleaning and sanitization go together but are separate processes. Dishes, equipment and counters have to be clean before they can be sanitized.
- After cleaning, spray counters with a sanitizing agent such as a chlorine rinse (one teaspoon per quart) or a disinfectant spray (example, Lysol).
- Washing dishes with hot soapy water removes most bacteria and is considered adequate. Dishes can also be sanitized if desired by adding chlorine to the rinse water, not the wash water. Let dishes air dry. Some, but not all, dishwashers reach adequate temperatures for sanitization.
- Sanitize the inside of refrigerators periodically.

Rule 2. Don't cross-contaminate. Cross contamination is when the microorganisms found in one food get in another food. Most people realize that it isn't a good idea to let meat drippings get on other foods, but may not think of the following indirect cross contamination situations:

- Meat cut on a cutting board that is then used while making a salad.
- Handling meat and then failing to adequately wash hands before handling other food.
- Raw meat placed on the counter and then lettuce set on the counter.
- Chicken washed in the sink and then the sink (without sanitizing) used to wash lettuce.
- The same marinades used for raw meat used on the cooked meats AFTER barbequing.
- Barbequed meats placed on platter that held the raw meat.
- Dirty hands or poorly washed hands wiped on a cloth towel and then the towel used to dry a plate.

- Drippings from poultry or meat may run off the cutting board onto the kitchen counter and then are wiped up with a cloth. The counter looks clean but pathogens may have been spread around instead of removed. Salmonella can live for 14-17 days on a dry counter top.
- When the cook's hands are contaminated, everything the cook touches also becomes contaminated; for example, the handle on the refrigerator. Some ways to control problems are:
- Buy two cutting boards and use one for raw meat, fish and poultry and the other for fresh produce and cooked meats.
- If your kitchen is big enough, use one area for working on raw meats and another for cooked foods.
- Use paper towels. If you really want to use cloth towels, have different ones for hand drying, wiping up spills and for dishes. Wash the towels at the end of the day.
- Transfer food from the stirring spoon to a tasting spoon instead of tasting from the stirring spoon.
- Become aware of what your hands touch.

Rule 3. Don't keep food between the temperatures of 40 to 140 degrees F for more than two hours. This rule is for the temperature of the food itself, not the temperature around the food. For example, a covered bowl containing leftover casserole might be placed in the refrigerator within 30 minutes of serving the meal. This does not mean that it is now safe. If the bowl is deep and fairly full, it may be several hours before the food in the bowl drops to a temperature below 40 degrees. The cover also gives a dead-air space above the food that can help insulate it.

- Put leftovers into shallow containers and cover with a lid, foil or plastic wrap to minimize air space. Or put the leftovers into a food grade plastic bag and flatten to not more than two inches thick.
- Perishable food purchased at the grocery store needs to be refrigerated as rapidly as possible. Eating ham left in a car trunk overnight is a high risk meal.
- The temperature of the refrigerator is important. The colder (above freezing) the refrigerator, the safer and the longer the storage of foods.
- Food for picnics and camping trips may be cold enough initially but warm up over time. Make icepacks for coolers by freezing water in partially filled milk jugs or other containers or by freezing boxes of fruit juice. These can then be used for drinking as they thaw. Wrap the cooler in a blanket or beach towel for extra insulation. Canned goods, fresh fruit and some fresh vegetables are good choices for camping trips since they do not require refrigeration.

Rule 4. Buy a thermometer and use it. Simply cooking food to an adequate temperature destroys most pathogens. Color of hamburger is not a foolproof way of knowing if it is safe, so use a thermometer to see if the meat is adequately hot in the center.

- Cooked ground meat, cube steaks and rolled roasts should be heated to 160 degrees F. Intact steaks (not cube steak) and whole roasts are safe at 145 degrees F.

- Use a thermometer to see if refrigerated foods are cooling quickly enough.
- If your freezer stops working, check the temperature of the thawing food. If the temperature is under 40 degrees, handle the food in the same way you would if the product were in the refrigerator.

Rule 5. Take special care if you have someone in the household that falls into the "vulnerable to food borne illness" category. These are the very young, very old and anyone whose immune system is weakened. Mishandled food will easily make these individuals sick and with more life threatening results. In addition to the above suggestions:

- Never serve them raw alfalfa sprouts, raw fish products or undercooked foods. Be especially careful of dishes that may have undercooked eggs.
- Cook hot dogs or baloney immediately before serving.
- Don't keep perishable food in the refrigerator for more than a few days.
- Don't use manure on your home garden unless composted at high temperatures.

---

* Dr. Charlotte Brennand is Utah State University Extension Food Safety Specialist