

# Outcomes and Impact Quarterly

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Volume 3  
Issue 1 *The Impact of Utah State University  
Extension on the Lives of Utahns*

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Article 5

4-1-2023

## The Impact of USU Extension on Public Food Safety

Heidi LeBlanc  
*Utah State University*, [heidi.leblanc@usu.edu](mailto:heidi.leblanc@usu.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

LeBlanc, H. (2023). The Impact of USU Extension on Public Food Safety. *Outcomes and Impact Quarterly*, 3(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/oiq/vol3/iss1/5>

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## **The Impact of USU Extension on Public Food Safety**

*Outcomes and Impact Quarterly: Special Edition*

Lead Contact: Heidi LeBlanc

### **Primary Critical Issue: Food Safety**

With a large variety of food products moving through complex distribution systems, food safety is a critical issue for producers, processors, distribution systems, and the final consumer. Foodborne illness is a major cause of death, claiming the lives of our most vulnerable populations; the elderly, young, pregnant women, people with impaired immune function, and the chronically ill. Improper food handling and preparation of food in food service establishments and the home contribute to food-borne illnesses. The Public Food Safety Education program at Utah State University (USU) Extension aims to provide relevant research-based education to Utah residents on best practices to reduce the risk of food contamination and foodborne illnesses. The major focus areas of this program are food preservation techniques and household food storage. The desired long-term outcomes of the Public Food Safety Education program are to (a) reduce the occurrences of foodborne illnesses in Utah through research-based education on food safety practices in households, and (b) to reduce food contamination in the food supply chain by providing relevant education on best practices to processors and producers.

### **Preserve the Harvest**

*USU Extension Faculty Contact: Melanie Jewkes*

Bacteria and other air particles can grow on food if not preserved accurately. These particles can grow into food-borne illnesses that can spoil food, inflict illness on individuals who eat the food, or even cause death in severe cases. With a tradition of food storage in Utah, many people preserve food in their homes and use old family recipes that have not been approved by the USDA. Also, many Utahns have a large supply of stored food that may never be used mostly due to a lack of knowledge of how to incorporate it into their day-to-day meals. There is a need to educate individuals on how to preserve food in their homes and use food storage ingredients by using pressure canner gauges to insure canned goods are processed accurately. In 2022, USU Extension hosted a Canning 101 series on food canning and preservation.

Most participants (43.4%,  $n = 101$ ) of the workshops series completed the post-course survey. Results showed 97% of participants used the food preservation resources provided, 79% explored information on USU Extension's website, 45% checked if the food preservation resources they had at home are up to date, 73% followed research-based directions provided by USU Extension and the USDA, 83% preserved food more often at home, 67% shared what they learned with other people, 21% had their pressure canner dial gauge tested, and 40% purchased additional and/or updated their preservation equipment. Results suggest the food preservation education provided by USU Extension will prevent food-borne illnesses. USU Extension will continue providing these classes to residents across the state to improve the health and well-being of individuals and reduce the economic burden of foodborne illnesses.

## **Food Preservation and Safety**

*USU Extension Faculty Contact: Jenna Dyckman*

The USDA promotes home canning as a safe and budget-friendly option for preserving food. When done properly, food preserved by canning can be more nutritious compared to produce found in local grocery stores. However, if food is home-canned improperly, bacteria, viruses, and other microorganisms could grow in the food making it unsafe to eat. If consumed, this could cause food-borne illnesses which could lead to hospitalization or even death. The microorganism of greatest concern is botulism, which can be fatal if contracted. To prevent the growth of these microorganisms, individuals must follow proper canning guidelines. Cache County FCS agent receives, on average, four calls a day related to food preservation and food safety. There is a high demand for education on canning and preservation. USU Extension developed a public education program in 2022 on food preservation. The program was divided into four main components; (a) Basics of Home Canning Lecture Class, (b) Hands-on Canning Class, (c) Master Food Preserver Training Course, and (d) Phone Calls and Pressure Lid Gauge Testing.

The Basics of Home Canning Class targeted individuals who were new to canning, and topics included food safety, safe recipes, canning methods, and storing canned goods. A total of 78 participants attended this class. The Hands-on Canning Class provided participants with the opportunity to experience the whole canning process, and in total, 29 participants attended this session. The Master Food Preserver Training Course is a 4-day training that covers all types of food preservation including canning basics, jams, jellies, fruits, vegetables, meats, pickling, salsa, tomatoes, dehydrating, freezing, and freeze-drying. Evaluation results of the food preservation classes indicated there was an increase in participants' knowledge of all concepts covered in the workshops.

The hands-on classes led to an increase in participants' confidence and skills to practice safe canning techniques at home. In the Master Food Preserver Training, participants demonstrated an increase in knowledge and skills to adopt proper canning techniques to safely can on their own. These outcomes can lead to a decrease in food-borne illnesses and the associated healthcare costs of treating those illnesses.