

Foodborne Illness

Unseen and often unnoticed, harmful bacteria can multiply in the warm weather, potentially bringing foodborne illnesses to the table. People need to take extra precautions with food when they get ready for a picnic or barbecue. Safety checks need to begin at the grocery store and end with leftovers.

Keeping cold foods cold and hot items hot is the basis of food safety. When shopping, buy cold food such as meat and poultry last. Don't let raw meat or poultry juices drip on other foods in your shopping cart; put them in separate plastic bags. Take groceries home immediately. In the summer, if you are traveling more than 30 minutes, put perishable food in a cooler with ice.

When getting ready to cook, completely defrost meat and poultry in the refrigerator before grilling so these foods cook evenly. Marinate meat and poultry in the refrigerator as well, not on the counter. If you use marinade both with raw food and as a sauce on cooked food, reserve part of it in a separate container before adding the raw meat or poultry.

For backyard picnics or barbecues, keep meat and poultry refrigerated until ready to use. If you are traveling, keep food in an insulated cooler with enough ice to keep the food at 41 degrees F or lower. Keep the cooler out of the direct sun and avoid opening the lid often. Be sure to pack beverages in one cooler and perishables in another.

Never consume the ice that is used to store the food or beverages. Wipe off the beverage cans or bottles before drinking, especially if they have been buried in the ice.

If you partially cook food in the microwave, oven or stove to reduce grilling time, do it right before the food goes on the grill. When it is time to cook the food, be sure to cook it thoroughly. Grilled food may brown quickly on the outside. A meat thermometer gives accurate internal temperatures. Beef, veal and lamb steaks and roasts should be cooked to 145 degrees F, pork and ground beef to 155 degrees F. Poultry should reach 165 degrees F.

If you don't have a meat thermometer, look for signs that the food is done. Cut into the food to check. Juices should run clear. Hamburgers should be medium well to well done and brown in the middle. Poultry should have no pink to it.

Proper food handling practices are extremely important to preventing foodborne illness, whether at home or on a picnic. Safe practices include:

- Clean all work surfaces and utensils before preparing food.
- Don't use the same cutting board, platter or utensils for raw meat as for fresh or cooked foods. Bacteria in raw meat or juices can contaminate other foods.
- Wash all fresh fruits and vegetables.

- Use different cutting boards or thoroughly wash and sanitize the one used. A simple, inexpensive solution for sanitizing food preparation surfaces is one tablespoon household bleach in a gallon of water.
- Always wash your hands. Have a water jug, soap and paper towels available outdoors.
- Serve food right away.

Food should not sit out for more than an hour; not more than 30 minutes in hot weather. Refrigerate leftovers promptly in shallow containers. Leftovers that have been off the grill for less than an hour can be taken home safely in a cooler filled with ice. Drain water from the ice chest regularly.

Remember: Contaminated foods do not necessarily look or smell bad, so always play it safe. Do not taste food to see if it is still good. When in doubt, throw it out.

Symptoms of foodborne illnesses can range from a mild upset stomach to cramps, vomiting, diarrhea, chills or fever.