

Fight BAC: Keeping Your Food Safe

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Before your next social event involving your family, friends and great food, ask yourself this very important question — is the food you are about to serve safe to eat? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there is a good chance that something you are serving is not. In fact, the CDC estimates that 48 million people in the United States get sick from a foodborne illness each year, 128,000 are hospitalized and 3,000 die. As startling as this data may be, when preparing food at home, there are simple things that you can do to drastically decrease the risk.

Overview

Before getting into the specifics of food safety, it is necessary to know that some foods are more likely to cause foodborne illnesses than others. For instance, raw foods from animals, such as meat, poultry, eggs, unpasteurized milk and raw shellfish are likely culprits. Also, raw fruits and vegetables can be of particular concern if they are not handled and cleaned appropriately. In addition to at-risk foods, some individuals are more at risk than others to get sick from improperly handled food. The CDC identifies four groups at greatest risk: adults age 65 and older, children younger than 5, people with weakened immune systems, and people who are pregnant.

Steps to Food Safety

The 4 most important rules of food safety are: Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill. If you do these things correctly when preparing foods, you will be protecting your family from a host of dangerous bugs that are bound to put a damper on any event.

Clean

Bacteria can spread easily throughout your kitchen by way of your hands and surfaces.

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds before, during and after handling food.
- Wash surfaces, cutting boards, dishes and utensils with hot, soapy water after contact with each food item.
- Thoroughly rinse fresh fruits and vegetables under running water before eating, and scrub firm-skinned produce with a clean produce brush.
- Use disposable paper towels to clean kitchen surfaces rather than reusing cloth towels.

Separate

Cross-contamination of foods and surfaces is how bacteria can get from one place to another.

- Designate different cutting boards, using one for raw meat, poultry and seafood and one for fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Never use the same plate for raw meat and then again for cooked meat.
- Keep raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs sealed and separate from other foods, both in your shopping cart and on the bottom shelf of your refrigerator so juices cannot drip onto other food.

Cook

Always cook to proper temperatures. Proper temperatures are the point at which harmful bacteria are killed.

- Keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot.
- Food may look fully cooked before it reaches the proper internal temperature — color is not a reliable indicator of doneness.
- Always use a food thermometer to determine proper temperatures. Cook poultry to 165°F, ground meats to 160°F, and whole cuts of beef, pork, lamb and veal to 145°F with a 3-minute rest time.
- Cook eggs until the yolks and whites are firm, and reheat leftovers to 165°F.

Chill

Be sure to refrigerate foods promptly and properly.

- Keep your refrigerator at 40°F or below and your freezer at 0°F or below.
- Refrigerate or freeze perishables and prepared foods within 2 hours — within 1 hour if the temperature is above 90°F.
- Always defrost frozen food in the refrigerator, in cold water or in the microwave, never at room temperature.
- Separate large amounts of food into smaller portions before freezing or refrigerating so that the food cools down quickly, and use refrigerated leftovers within 3 to 4 days.

Following the rules above will help to ensure safe and happy eating at your next holiday event, picnic, barbeque, or simple family meal. For more information on the rules of food safety or for specific cooking times and temperatures, visit the websites listed below. Happy eating!

References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “Facts About Food Poisoning.” CDC, www.cdc.gov/food-safety/data-research/facts-stats/

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