

Features

November 18, 2007

Keep your food safe and yourself healthy

Food that goes bad can make you sick, and this is called food poisoning or food-borne illness. Many people do not think about food safety until a food-related illness affects them or a family member. While the food supply in the United States is one of the safest in the world, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 76 million people get sick, more than 300,000 are hospitalized and 5,000 Americans die each year from food-borne illness. Preventing food-borne illness and resulting fatalities remains a major public health challenge.

Sometimes when people think they have the flu or a “stomach bug,” they really have food-borne illness. Typical symptoms of food poisoning are nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and diarrhea. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to protect yourself and your family from illness that comes from eating “bad” food, such as having good personal hygiene, preventing cross-contamination, cooking to proper temperatures and making sure that storage and refrigeration temperatures are accurate and appropriate.

You cannot always see, smell or taste germs on food. But you can keep in mind there are certain foods that germs like best. The foods that most often cause illness are milk and other dairy products, eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, fruits and vegetables, unpasteurized or untreated juices (such as apple cider), sprouts, raw eggs and foods that contain raw eggs, such as cookie dough and Caesar salad dressing.

Here are some tips for buying safe food in the grocery store:

- Avoid buying cans that are bulging or jars that have cracks or loose lids.
- Check eggs to make sure that none of the eggs are broken or cracked.
- Buy only eggs that are refrigerated in the store.
- When you buy meat, try to buy meats that do not have juices running in the container. These juices may have germs.
- If there is a little juice in the package, put the package in a separate plastic bag to make sure the juices don't come into contact with other foods.
- Your last stop in the grocery store should be milk and other cold foods to keep them cold longer, and hot foods to give them less time to cool off.
- After shopping, get home as soon as you can. Put food into the refrigerator or freezer right away.

Finally, be sure that you follow these rules of food safety in your home to keep yourself and your family healthy:

- Be sure that your refrigerator and freezer are the right temperature for storing food (check your owner's manual).
- Throw away anything that looks or smells suspicious. If you think it might be bad, don't taste it!
- Wash your hands well before preparing food.
- Keep your work area, wash rags and utensils clean.
- Cook meats thoroughly (use a meat thermometer).
- Fresh fruits and vegetables need to be cleaned before being eaten. There are many fruit washes available at the grocery stores that wash away not only dirt, but also pesticides and wax coatings.

--When reheating food, always make sure that it is hot and steaming. Gravies should come to a rolling boil.

--If reheating in a microwave oven, cover the food and rotate the dish so it heats evenly. Inadequate heating in the microwave can contribute to illnesses.

--When you purchase hot cooked food, keep it hot. Eat and enjoy your food within two hours to prevent harmful bacteria from multiplying. If you do not eat it within two hours, keep your food in the oven set at a high enough temperature to keep the food at or above 140 degrees Fahrenheit. Stuffing and side dishes must also stay hot.

--Discard any perishable foods left at room temperature longer than two hours.