



Preventing foodborne illness in the summer

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Summertime is for getting together in backyards for burgers, bratwurst, and potato salad. Unfortunately, for some, it can also mean a nasty stomach ache and spending hours in misery in the bathroom after eating something that was undercooked or handled improperly.

Food-borne illnesses are common during the summer months. They can range from a quick 24-hour infection caused by a toxin or virus to prolonged bacterial diarrheal illnesses, such as those caused by salmonella and E. coli. Symptoms vary from nausea and vomiting, to watery, mucousy, or bloody diarrhea, stomach cramps, headaches, and fever. Occasionally, these illnesses can be life-threatening. While these types of problems can be quite nasty, they are usually very preventable.

The most common place for food-borne bugs to reside is on raw meat or high protein foods that have been prepared and allowed to sit out for long periods during or after preparation. Preventing illness begins from the time you bring meat home from the store. Everything you do, from where you store it and thaw it, to how you prepare it and cook it, requires vigilance. Here are some tips for ensuring safety at each step:

*Thaw meat in the refrigerator, preferably on the lowest shelf or drawer where juices from the thawing meat cannot drip onto other food, especially foods that will be served fresh, like fruit or salad. Do not refreeze meat you have thawed.

*Wash your hands thoroughly each time you handle meat and frequently throughout the preparation process. Take special precautions before handling other foods that will be served fresh.

*Avoid cross-contamination. Use a knife and cutting board dedicated to meat preparation that will not also be used to prepare fresh fruits and vegetables. If you absolutely must use the same knife and cutting board, consider preparing the fresh foods first, or wash the knife and cutting board in very hot, soapy water and dry it completely before using for fresh foods.

*Make sure your cutting boards are in good shape and are free from nicks, cracks, and deep cuts. If these flaws are present, it can be difficult to disinfect.

*When grilling, don't put cooked meat back onto the same platter it came to the grill on when it was raw. Use fresh tongs once the outside of the meat is seared, or wash them after putting meat on the grill.



*Some people love their burgers rare, but this can be a recipe for disaster. Ensure meats are grilled to the correct internal temperature. Check this with a meat thermometer. Internal temperatures for different meats can be found at http://www.fsis.usda.gov/fact_sheets/Barbecue_Food_Safety/index.asp.

*Keep items cool that you would normally refrigerate. Food such as potato salad, which may contain egg products, shouldn't be sitting out on the picnic table for hours on end. At a minimum, keep a cooler with ice handy to store these items. The website above also has more tips for this.

*Be particularly careful when preparing large batches of food. Since the time to prepare is often longer, there may be a tendency to use the same bowls and utensils to prepare several small batches and it's harder to find space in the refrigerator to store it.

If you become ill with a diarrheal illness that doesn't resolve within a day or two, if you are unable to keep fluids down, or if your diarrhea is bloody, visit your health care provider. Many people tend to associate the last thing they ate with their current stomach woes, but this is not always the case. Some contaminants can take several hours to cause illness but others take days or even a week or two to cause symptoms. If more than one person is ill with similar symptoms and attended the same gathering, your local Preventive Medicine staff are trained to investigate potential causes and help stop any further spread of illness. The telephone number is (719) 526-2939.

With a bit of common sense and vigilance, you can make sure your summer memories include the great time spent with family and friends and that fantastic bacon cheese-burger you are famous for, instead of memories about getting sick!