

Important Food Safety Tips for the Summer Months

It is important to thoroughly cook meats and properly prepare fresh produce when planning picnics and barbeques during the busy summer months. After all, foodborne illness can result from improperly prepared or improperly stored foods. Foodborne illness can be especially serious for pregnant women, babies, and the elderly. The good news is that there are several important, common sense steps that can be taken that will help reduce the risk of foodborne illness and ensure healthy and safe meals.

First, **WASH YOUR HANDS** before preparing or serving food. Use warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds prior to food preparation or service, as well as in between tasks. For instance, hands should be washed after handling raw meat, before you move onto any other task.

Most of us agree that warm, sunny days are perfect for a picnic with burgers on the grill, homemade potato salad and fresh produce, but the summer heat can spoil your food. Food left out in the sun or in warm cars too long can cause foodborne illness. Temperature control is one of the keys to safe food preparation. Bacteria grow rapidly at elevated temperatures, but do not grow well at temperatures under 45 degrees. Perishable foods such as poultry, shellfish, eggs and dairy products should be refrigerated if not used within two hours. If you are storing foods in coolers, be sure to keep a separate cooler for any raw meat, and be sure that ice used to keep foods cold is not the same ice that you put in your drinks. Be sure to keep all coolers well iced until foods are ready to be either cooked or eaten.

Cooking food very hot will destroy bacteria and viruses. Use a food thermometer to check food temperatures when grilling, cooking, or broiling meat. The internal temperature of the thickest portion of the cut should reach at least 160 degrees for beef, veal, lamb, pork and ham. Poultry should be cooked to at least 165 degrees. Using a thermometer is the most reliable way for consumers to ensure that meat and poultry have reached a temperature sufficient to kill disease-causing organisms. You cannot tell simply by looking whether meat is cooked enough to destroy harmful organisms.

A few other tips that will help you to have a safe, healthy barbeque or picnic include...

1. Wipe surfaces often, especially after using them for food preparation. Germs from raw or undercooked meat can grow on vegetables cut or washed on the same surface as the meat. Mix a sanitizer solution of 1 capful bleach per gallon of water for cleaning work area surfaces. Consider using separate cutting boards for the preparation of meats and vegetables.
2. Marinate foods in the refrigerator.
3. Never re-use plates before washing them, especially plates that have been used to hold raw meats or eggs.

4. Don't prepare and serve food if you have been sick with vomiting or diarrhea within the past 24 hours.
5. Pack plenty of paper towels for cleaning hands and surfaces at your picnic.
6. Thoroughly rinse all fruits and vegetables. Check for blemishes and bruises and cut them out.
7. When preparing raw meat, remember to thaw in the refrigerator or microwave; never leave meat out at air temperature, and cook promptly after removing from the fridge or cooler.
8. WASH HANDS OFTEN!!!

Finally, if you are planning an event that is going to be open to the public, please be sure to contact your local Health Department (in Cayuga County the number is 253-1405) for a permit and any additional requirements that you any need to follow.