

Foodborne Illnesses Are “Food For Thought” This Summer

As temperatures peak over the summer, many El Paso County residents prefer to beat the heat of the kitchen and take to the great outdoors to indulge their palates—participating in group picnics, barbecues and other gatherings in backyards and neighborhood parks. Hamburgers, chicken, deli-style sandwiches and assorted fruits are some of the savory fare we crave at these venues. But before you head into the open air with your bean salad and bratwurst in-tow, there are some food storage, handling and preparation tips you should keep in mind to make sure your summer feast doesn't attract an undesired guest—namely, food-borne illness.

Food safety procedures aren't limited to the nearly 2,500 restaurants and other retail food vendors that the Health Department is charged with inspecting; they also are essential for individual meals prepared in and outside the home. In fact, a significant number of food-borne illnesses across the U.S. are attributed to unsafe food practices, such as poor handwashing and people who handle food when they are sick with diarrhea. The most common “infection agents” for food-related diseases are *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *E. coli* and Norovirus. Raw foods originating from animals are most prone to bacterial contamination—including raw meat, poultry and shellfish; raw eggs; and un-pasteurized milk. Fruits and vegetables also are at risk for contamination, as illustrated by the recent FDA advisories on food-borne outbreaks associated with salmonella-tainted tomatoes, resulting in widespread recalls.

Many of us may not be familiar with the significant health risks associated with contaminated foods, but an estimated 76 million cases of food-borne disease occur each year in the U.S. Nationwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths annually linked to food-borne diseases. People often mistake food-borne illness for other health issues, such as the flu, although there are notable differences. Common food-borne disease symptoms include upset stomach, diarrhea and vomiting, and symptoms typically occur 8-36 hours after eating contaminated food. People with severe or prolonged symptoms should consult with a physician, since some cases can lead to hospitalization if left untreated.

The best way to avoid sickness from potentially contaminated foods is to follow the Four Basics of Food Safety:

Clean: Wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 15 seconds before and after preparing foods and prior to eating food. Don't forget to dry your hands using clean, disposable towels. Also be sure to wash the outside skins and rinds of fruits and vegetables to remove lingering germs and chemicals.

Separate: Separate raw meat and poultry from ready-to-eat foods such as cold sandwiches, fruits and vegetables. When storing ingredients for later use pack them, pre-cleaned and cut, in plastic containers.

Cook: Indoors or outdoors, cooking temperatures should remain constant. Don't assume that meat is fully cooked just from its appearance; it is a myth that meat is safe to eat when its natural juices run clear. Use a probe thermometer to check internal food temperatures. (See Temperature 'Danger Zones' to follow.)

Chill: Perishable foods that are usually kept in the refrigerator—such as lunchmeat, cooked and uncooked meats, pasta salads and melons—must be kept at 41 °F or colder. When transporting perishable foods, keep them in a cooler with ice or freezer packs whenever possible, and don't allow them to sit at room temperature for a prolonged period of time. Note: This food safety standard also applies to take-out food from restaurants.

Finally, “when in doubt, throw it out.” You should always error on the side of caution when uncertain whether food is safe to eat. Best wishes for a summer celebrated with family, friends and feasts...but hold the food-borne illness, please.

Temperature “Danger Zones”

- Keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot. Cold foods should be kept at or below 41°F and hot foods should be maintained at or above 140°F.
- Meats should be cooked as follows (temperatures noted are internal):
 - Poultry and stuffing—165 °F
 - Pork—145 °F
 - Beef, lamb and seafood—145 °F
 - Hamburger/ground beef—155 °F

For additional food safety information, visit the Health Department Web site at:
www.elpasocountyhealth.org

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