Don't Let Germs Spoil the Fun of This Year's Barbecue Season

With summer just around the corner, it’s time to fire up the grill for the barbecue season. However, make sure you don't spoil the fun with unwanted guests - bacteria that cause food borne illness, or food poisoning. The warm weather provides an ideal environment for bacteria and other pathogens to multiply rapidly. Symptoms may occur within thirty minutes to a few days or even weeks after eating contaminated foods. Follow these important food safety steps as you prepare for your summer outdoor eating events.

Washing your hands helps prevent the spread of bacteria from one food to another. Wash hands often with warm soapy water for 15 seconds or longer, and always wash before and after handling foods.

When transporting food, keep it cold to minimize bacterial growth. Use a clean, insulated cooler packed with 75 percent food and 25 percent ice or frozen cold packs. Pack foods into the cooler that are already cold or frozen. When room temperature foods are packed into cold coolers, it is unlikely they will be cooled adequately. Transport the cooler in the coolest part of the car. Keep the cooler in the shade and open only when necessary.

Keeping raw meats separated from ready-to-eat foods will also help prevent the spread of bacteria. Use two separate cutting boards for raw meats and other ready-to-eat foods. For example, use one cutting board for raw meat, poultry and fish and another for fruits and vegetables.

Planning to cook on the grill? The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends preheating the coals on your grill for 20 to 30 minutes, or until the coals are lightly coated with ash. Marinate meats in the refrigerator in sealed containers or plastic bags. Keep foods cold until you are ready to cook them. If you plan to use the marinade as a sauce on the cooked food, reserve a portion before putting the meat in the marinade. If you place your meat in the marinade and still want to use it for a sauce, bring it to a boil to destroy harmful bacteria before serving.

Cook meats to safe internal temperatures to destroy harmful bacteria. The outside surfaces of meats cook quickly and may appear done before the inside meat reaches a safe temperature. Check the internal temperature using a meat thermometer to be certain your meat is properly cooked. According to the FDA, hamburgers should be cooked to 160°F. Large cuts of meat, such as roast or steaks, may be cooked to 145°F for medium rare or to 160°F for medium. Poultry should be cooked to 165°F. Cook fish until it is opaque and flakes easily.

Once food reaches a safe temperature, use a clean utensil to place food on a clean plate. Using the same dish and/or utensils on cooked meat that were used with raw meat can transfer bacteria to cooked meat, making it unsafe to eat.

Keep cooked foods hot at 140°F or warmer until ready to serve. Foods should not be left out for more than one hour during hot weather (temperatures 90°F and above). Therefore, leftovers should be refrigerated promptly. Foods that have been out longer than one hour should be discarded.

Make your outdoor eating events enjoyable and worry-free by practicing safe food-handling techniques. Family and friends will create lasting memories that won't be haunted by food borne illnesses.