

Summer Picnics

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Danielle Summers, Extension Agent II, Leon County Extension Service—Family & Consumer Sciences

Plenty of warm temperatures and the end of the school year lead to summer fun and many opportunities for outdoor gatherings involving food. And unless key food safety practices are followed, friends and family may wish to think twice before taking a seat at the picnic table.

"The risk of foodborne illness increases during the summer months because disease-causing bacteria grow faster on raw meat and poultry products in warmer weather," said USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety, Dr. Richard Raymond. "Bacteria also need moisture to flourish and summer weather, often hot and humid, provides the perfect conditions."

Food-poisoning bacteria grow quickly in warm temperatures. Unwashed hands, undercooked meats, cross-contamination from raw meats to other foods and eating unwashed fruits and vegetables can spread these bacteria. Follow these USDA guidelines to help keep friends and family safe from foodborne illness.

- Clean – Wash hands and surfaces often.
- Separate – Don't cross-contaminate. Keep raw meat and poultry apart from cooked foods.
- Cook – Use a food thermometer to be sure meat and poultry are safely cooked.
- Chill – Refrigerate or freeze promptly.

According to the Food and Drug Administration, twenty percent of consumers do not wash their hands and kitchen surfaces before preparing food. This is the first step in safe food handling. Use hot, soapy water to wash hands, utensils and preparation surfaces before and after food preparation. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water for 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, bring disposable towelettes or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Hand-washing is one of the simplest ways to help reduce the threat of foodborne illness.

Marinate meats for more flavor and tenderness, but make sure you are marinating safely. Sauces and marinades used on raw meat or poultry can potentially harbor bacteria that can make people sick. If you plan to use the marinade 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.

Have more than one spatula, fork and other utensil on hand when grilling. Backyard chefs often use a spatula or kitchen tongs to place raw food on the grill and later use the same utensil to remove the food after its been fully cooked. Because the utensil came into contact with raw food, it could harbor bacteria and transfer them to the cooked food. Use two utensils: one for raw food and one for cooked food. The same is true for the serving plate. Use one plate for the raw meat and another clean plate for serving.

University of Florida Food Safety Specialists recommend cooking meats to a safe internal temperature 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. Just looking at the meat can be misleading. All poultry products should reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F. Ground beef and pork should be cooked to 160°F and steaks, roasts and fish should be cooked to 145°F.

Keep foods and beverages cold in a clean, insulated cooler. Pack beverages and other popular picnic items like hot dogs, raw meats, salads and condiments in a cooler with enough ice or freezer packs to keep the temperature inside at 40°F or below.

Once foods have been cooked, they continue to be at risk of causing foodborne illness. Realize that foods left out in temperatures higher than 90°F will become unsafe in just one hour. Foods that are left sitting on the table for a few hours should not be eaten. Hot foods need to be kept hot (140°F or higher). Use the grill and warming trays to maintain these temperatures. Refrigerate leftovers promptly or repackage them in the cooler. Discard foods that have been out longer than one hour.

Summertime provides many opportunities for grilling and outdoor events. Follow these safe food practices when preparing your meals to ensure safety from harmful bacteria in the foods you eat and serve.

Source: USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service: *Heed Safe Cooking and Food Handling Advice For The Summer Grilling Season.*