

Summer Food Safety

Mouth-watering barbecue, tempting potato salad, delicious apple pie, and juicy watermelon wedges. These may be just a few of the delectable items gracing the picnic table this summer. But before you start loading up your plate and sitting down for a memorable meal, you might want to follow a few simple steps to make sure you don't accidentally serve yourself some helpings of salmonella, E. coli or wisteria.

Food poisoning, or food borne illness, is more common during the warm summer months. That's because those nasty little bacteria that are always present in the environment grow faster in temperatures from 90°F to 110°F; and since bacteria also like moisture, high humidity can help them flourish.

To avoid the unwanted and quite uncomfortable side-effects of food poisoning, here are a few ways to keep your food safe from the time you buy it at the store, to the time you put leftovers away in the refrigerator.

At the Grocery Store

Check expiration dates for meat, poultry or fish. Put meats in plastic bags so juices do not leak onto other items in the cart. If buying eggs, make sure none are cracked. Buy refrigerated items last. Avoid fruits with broken skins, unpasteurized milk, ciders or juices, and pre-stuffed fresh turkeys or chickens.

In the Kitchen

Wash your hands before preparing food. Cook or freeze raw meat, poultry or fish within two days. Clean all fruits and vegetables with water to remove any pesticides, dirt or bacterial contamination. Remove the outer leaves of leafy greens, such as spinach or lettuce. Do not put cooked food on a dish that was holding raw meat, poultry or fish. Marinate food in the refrigerator.

On the Grill

Use a thermometer to cook foods to proper internal temperatures, such as 160°F for red meats and 180°F for poultry. Fish should flake easily when cooked properly. Avoid partially cooking food ahead of time since this allows bacteria to survive and multiply to the point that subsequent cooking does not destroy them.

At the Picnic

Do not leave food that requires refrigeration out for more than two hours (one hour if over 90°F). Keep food in insulated coolers at 40°F or below until ready to eat. Place coolers in the shade and avoid opening the lid too often. Keep foods hot by using chafing dishes and food cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice. Avoid serving dairy products at picnics.

In the Refrigerator

Refrigerate leftovers as soon as possible. Do not over pack the refrigerator because that inhibits air circulation and slows down the cooling process. Eat leftovers in three to five days. If leftovers are frozen, eat them within two months.

All foods can become contaminated, but properly handling, preparing and storing food can reduce the risk of food poisoning. If you have any doubts about the safety of food, throw it out. Better to be safe than sorry. For more information about safe food handling, visit the United States Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service website at www.fsis.usda.gov.