Preventing Food-borne Illness in the Home

Food-borne illnesses occur when people eat foods that contain disease-causing organisms. Food-borne illnesses usually affect the stomach and intestines. Common symptoms include one or more of the following: diarrhea, fever, headache, fatigue, dehydration, abdominal pain and cramping, nausea and vomiting.

Food-borne illness facts

- It is just as common to get a food-borne illness from food you prepare at home as it is from food prepared at a restaurant.
- Symptoms can begin hours or days after eating contaminated food, but usually start within one to two days.
- Most food has some bacteria in it. If food is not cooled, cooked, prepared or stored properly, the bacteria can multiply to high numbers that can cause illness.
- Food can cause illness even if it looks, smells and tastes normal.

Health tip:

To keep stored food cold, don't overfill the refrigerator or freezer. Keep temperature at 41°F or below. Don't block the refrigerator or freezer fan. Foods cool faster in a small, shallow uncovered container in the refrigerator or freezer. Once food has cooled, you can move it to a larger container, cover it and refrigerate it for later use.

Preparing Food

Produce

- Wash all produce in a clean and sanitized sink immediately after purchasing and before putting into your refrigerator since it may have bacteria on it that can make your family sick.
- Even produce with a peel must be washed prior to cutting as you could accidently carry the contamination from the exterior to the interior of the fruit.
- Be sure to wash items such as cantaloupes, watermelons and avocados before slicing them open.

Handwashing

- Wash your hands before and after handling any meat, poultry or seafood.
- Always wash your hands with hot, soapy water after using the bathroom, changing diapers, touching pets, or any other activity that could contaminate your hands, such as handling wastebaskets or trash cans.
- *Always wash your hands before preparing food!*

Cooking Food

Cook foods to the proper temperature

- Use a metal stem type thermometer to check food temperatures. These thermometers can be purchased at most major grocery stores, hardware stores or online.
- Be sure to wash and sanitize your food thermometer after each use to prevent cross-contamination of bacteria.

Cooking and Reheating

Some raw foods such as meat and eggs contain harmful bacteria. If these foods are not cooked to high enough temperatures, the bacteria can make people sick. Different foods carry different kinds of bacteria and must be cooked to certain temperatures to be safe to eat.

Safe cooking temperatures:

Rare roast beef.............. 130°F

The following temperatures must be maintained for at least 15 seconds:

Steak............................. 145°F
Eggs.............................. 145°F
Fish............................... 145°F
Poultry .... 165°F
Ground Beef .... 155°F
Pork .... 145°F
Reheating leftovers ...... 165°F

(over)

Cross-Contamination

Cross-contamination is a cause of many food-borne illness outbreaks. Harmful bacteria are spread when food items such as raw meats or raw meat juices come in contact with another food item. Bacteria can also be spread when food touches cutting boards, knives, utensils or food preparation surfaces—and these items are not washed, rinsed and sanitized before the next use.

Clean your surfaces and utensils

- Clean and sanitize all utensils, cutting boards, sinks and counter-top surfaces thoroughly before and after preparing food, especially raw meats. Follow these three easy steps:
  1. First, wash all items with hot soapy water
  2. Second, rinse these items with hot water
  3. Third, sanitize with 3/4 tablespoon unscented bleach per gallon of water. This is especially important when preparing raw meat, poultry, eggs or seafood. Keep a supply of the bleach solution in a labeled spray bottle near the sink to sanitize all surfaces that have had contact with raw meats.

- Sponges are discouraged since bacteria grow quickly in them.

Separate Meats

- Store raw meat, poultry and seafood separately on the lowest shelf in the refrigerator. Store items in sealed containers or plastic bags on a plate or in a container to prevent leakage onto other foods.

- If you must thaw food quickly, seal it in a plastic bag and immerse in cold water for about an hour, or in the microwave on the "defrost" setting.

- Do NOT defrost food at room temperature on the countertop.

- Sauce that is used to marinate raw meat, poultry or seafood should not be used on cooked foods unless it is boiled before applying.

- Another option is to separate a portion of the sauce before marinating the meat and use this portion on the cooked meat.

If you think you have a food-borne illness:

- See your health care provider if symptoms are severe or last for more than a few days.

- Avoid preparing foods for others if you have been ill with vomiting and diarrhea.

- Always wash your hands well after going to the bathroom and before eating or preparing food.

- Write down everything you ate or drank in the past three days and call your local health department.