

## Safe and Egg-citing Family Meals

The celebrations that often accompany holidays and graduations during the spring season lend themselves to share meals as a family. These meals promote positive interactions among family members, provide the opportunity to enjoy more nutritionally balanced meals, and support the family in building and/or maintaining family ties. With so many benefits related to family meals, it's important to include ensure that the food served at the table is safe and nutritional.

There are four food safety concepts that are foundational to keeping family meals (and food, in general) safe:

**CLEAN:** Bacteria are a normal part of our environment. However, certain types of bacteria can make us sick. In the food preparation environment, bacteria can spread fast and easily unless we take precautions. Hands, cutting boards, countertops and knives must be washed frequently and thoroughly to prevent the spread of bacteria. Washing your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food will help eliminate the transfer of harmful bacteria. Handling food packaging that has leaked or has touched unclean surfaces contaminates your hands. Wash your hands after you un-wrap food items and before you touch the food directly. If your family meal is being prepared and/or served outdoors, plan ahead in order to have the supplies and resources you need to provide a safe food environment for everyone.

**SEPARATE:** Avoid cross-contamination. Cross-contamination occurs when bacteria from one food product is spread to another food product. This often happens when using cutting boards, knives and even your hands during various step of food preparation without thoroughly washing the utensils or hand in between each step of the process. For example, if you are making a chef salad that includes both vegetables and meat products, you should wash your hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before handling any of the ingredients. Make sure you are using clean utensils and the preparation surfaces have all been cleaned. Wash your vegetables under running tap water. Do no use detergent or bleach as these products are not intended for consumption. Prepare your vegetables as desired then wash your hands, utensils, and preparation surfaces again – before you cut up meat or other protein foods to put on top of the salad. Your safest food handing practice is to thoroughly wash between each step of the process.

**COOK:** Make sure you are cooking food to the proper temperatures. Whether you are cooking inside or grilling outdoors, hamburger, pork, beef, veal, and lamb need to be cooked to an internal temperature of at least 160°F and poultry to a slightly higher

temperature - 165°F. Meat thermometers can be purchased in the housewares section of local stores. If you are holding cooked food for serving, the internal temperature must be maintained at 140°F or higher for no longer than 2 hours.

**CHILL:** Keep cold food, cold. This slows bacterial growth. Keep your refrigerator at 40°F, or even colder. Keep freezers at 0°F for best food safety results. Make sure you put your groceries away as soon as you get home. If you have enjoyed your family meal, don't wait to put the leftovers away. Allowing cold foods to warm up to room temperature allows bacteria to grow. As a general rule, cold food should not be left out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours. If it is hot outside, the time decreases rapidly. If you are using a cooler, pack the food in ice within an hour.

**Putting it into practice:** As a child, my family liked to hide *real* Easter eggs. Once found, they would come back into the kitchen for a close inspection to make sure they were safe to use for the deviled eggs served at lunch. We didn't get to use them a second time. At the time I had no idea why dad was being so "protective" about the real eggs. I have since learned that his training as a mess sergeant in the Army was behind the "hide only once" rule we had about our real Easter eggs. We would color our eggs on Friday night and they would go into the refrigerator for overnight. The "Easter Bunny" came sometime in the early morning and we would set out to find them soon after. Dad, our Easter Bunny, would make sure the eggs weren't out of the refrigerator for more than an hour or so. As a farm kid, he was raised that wasting eggs for this annual event was not an option and was careful with their use. I guess you could say we "recycled" our Easter eggs. Their first use was as part of our family celebration and then they were "repurposed" for our family consumption. All the while, we followed the "clean, separate, cook, and chill" food safety principals. If your family tradition is to participate in making, coloring and hiding Easter eggs, be aware of these safe food handling practices and put them to good use.

Traditions such as the one I just shared grow from spending time together as a family and a good way to do that is around the dinner table. The value of eating together as family cannot be understated. During family celebrations and meals, life experiences, culture, and traditions offered through family conversations are passed from one generation to the next. Keep your family and food safe as you celebrate family this spring around the dinner table! For more information on safe food handling, contact me at the Geary County Extension office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!