

A family's schedule in the summer months is often hectic. It may include vacation, weekend camping trips, ball tournaments or, especially in August, a day-long back-to-school shopping trip. There is typically a lot of planning that goes in to any one of these activities. A critical, yet often overlooked part of these plans should include planning for meals and transporting food in hot weather.

The number of foodborne illnesses, also known as food poisoning, rises in the summer months. The reason for this is two-fold. First, bacteria are a natural part of our environment. They are present in the air, soil, water, and in our bodies as well as our pets' bodies. These microorganisms thrive in warm and moist environments. Consider the amount of heat and humidity experienced in the last few weeks. This leads to increased bacteria growth in foods that aren't handled properly during the summer months.

Second, summer months provide for an increase in outdoor activities. The family picnics, barbeques, and outdoor parties with friends and in the community are prime environments for increased bacteria growth. A kitchen provides a safer environment for food preparation with access to refrigeration, kitchen sinks and handwashing supplies, and thermostat-controlled cooking appliances. Outside of that environment, food can more easily become contaminated.

What can be done to help reduce exposure to foodborne illness? The United States Department of Agriculture advocates these four simple steps:

- 1) Clean: Wash Hands and Surfaces Often. A prime cause of food poisoning is from cross-contamination in handling or touching food. Wash your hands often with warm, soapy water before and after handling food, and after using the bathroom, handling pets, or changing diapers.

If you are eating away from the safety a kitchen provides, find out if there is a safe source of safe drinking water. If not, bring water for food preparation and cleaning service areas. Keep disposable washcloths or moist towelettes and paper towels in the car to help keep hands clean.

- 2) Separate: Don't Cross-Contaminate. Another prime cause of food poisoning is the result of cross-contamination during food preparation, grilling, and serving food. Keep raw foods wrapped up and separated from cooked foods. Do not place cooked hamburgers on the same plate the raw patties were on. Either

clean the plate with hot water and soap in between uses, or use a clean plate for the cooked hamburger.

- 3) Cook: Cook to Safe Temperatures. Reaching the appropriate temperature in foods will kill harmful bacteria that cause foodborne illness. Make sure to take a food thermometer along to ensure the proper temperature is reached. Grilled meats are prone to turn brown on the outside before they are thoroughly cooked on the inside.

Raw beef, veal, pork, and lamb steaks, as well as chops and roasts should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 145°F. Ground meats are more susceptible to contamination due to the increased surface area added during processing. Thus, raw ground beef, pork, poultry, lamb, and veal need to be cooked to an internal temperature of 160°F. Poultry needs to be cooked to an internal temperature of 165°F as measured with a food thermometer.

Using a heat resistant food thermometer to measure the internal temperature is the most accurate way to measure the doneness of meat or poultry. For both safety and quality, allow the meat to rest for at least three minutes before it is cut and served.

- 4) Chill: Refrigerate Promptly. Remember that bacteria like moisture and warmth. By chilling cooked food immediately after serving, the risk of food borne illness is greatly reduced, as this inhibits bacteria growth.

When packing a cooler, several steps can be taken to make sure the food stay cold and safe for the duration of the event. Suzanne Driessen, an Extension Food Safety Educator from the University of Minnesota Extension Service, offers these packing tips:

- Pack foods directly from the refrigerator into the cooler. Start with cold or frozen food. Juices, meats, even milk, can be placed in the cooler in the frozen state to help keep the rest of the food cold. It will thaw in time for serving.
- Keep meat and poultry separate from foods that will be eaten raw. Use a separate cooler or place them in a leak proof container or bag.
- A full cooler will stay colder longer than one partially filled.
- Use the right size cooler to meet your needs.
- Remember, foods like lunchmeats, cooked chicken, potato or pasta salads need to be kept in a cooler. Keep the food at 40° F or colder.
- Pack your cooler with several inches of ice or use frozen gel-packs, frozen juice boxes, or frozen water bottles. Block ice keeps longer than ice cubes. Use clean, empty milk or water jugs to pre-freeze blocks of ice.
- Store food in watertight containers to prevent contact with melting ice water.
- If the cooler is only partially filled, pack with more ice or with nonperishable food like peanut butter, jelly, and hard-like cheese.
- Keep the cooler inside the car where it's air-conditioned and not in the trunk.

- Cover it with a heavy bath towel for further insulation.
- Limit the times the cooler is opened. Open and close the lid quickly.

Time spent with family and friends should result in having fun, not in getting sick from an avoidable food borne illness. Take time to plan meals and food handling carefully to make sure you don't contribute to food borne illness statistics. For more information about safe food handling, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!