Proper food handling and storage – reducing the risk of contamination

Appendix M

Due to the illnesses and incidents which have occurred across the United States, there has been more media coverage and information concerning food poisoning. Recently, this has included newspaper articles and television news programs. All have reviewed illnesses which can and have occurred. What is your risk of exposure, and what safeguards should you practice to reduce the potential of a foodborne illness?

Handle food safely

Meat and poultry processors have begun providing additional labeling on packages to better educate and protect consumers. Government agencies including the USDA have been underway in establishing stricter testing and inspection requirements for food processors, as well as programs to assess food safety along the entire food distribution chain. It is important to understand that an improved inspection system can't replace good sanitation and safe food handling by those food handlers responsible for the final storing, preparing, and serving of food. This would include restaurants, schools, parishes, and consumer households. As many schools and parishes routinely prepare and serve food, the following information is being provided to review safe storing, preparation, and serving of food.

 Refrigerators should be kept at 40 degrees or cooler. Freezers should be kept at 0 degrees. Raw meat and poultry should be refrigerated as soon as possible after purchasing or receiving. At the grocery store or deli, keep raw meats and poultry separated from other perishables. Never thaw frozen meat and poultry on the kitchen counter. Thaw them in the refrigerator. If in a hurry, thaw in a bag under cold running water. If a microwave is used for thawing, the food should be immediately cooked. Always refrigerate when marinating food.

 Canned goods should be stored in a cool, dry area and should be free of cracks, dents, and bulging.

 Cooked or prepared food requiring refrigeration should never be left unrefrigerated for more than two hours. In a warm environment, food should sit out no longer than one hour. Refrigerate or freeze cooked/prepared foods in shallow containers rather than deep containers.

 Refrigeration and freezing does not kill bacteria on food which sat out too long and has started to spoil. When in doubt, throw it out.

Two of the more common types of food poisoning are caused from salmonella and E.coli bacteria. At least 40,000 salmonella infections are reported annually. Experts estimate 500,000 to 4 million infections actually occur.

Any raw food of animal origin (i.e. meat, poultry, eggs, raw milk, fish, and shellfish) may carry salmonella. Food can be contaminated with E.coli when a food handler or cook does not follow good sanitary procedures. Critical to this is washing hands after using a bathroom.

Don't let bacteria spread or grow

The key to preventing an exposure is to not allow any contamination while preparing food and to effectively destroy bacteria during the cooking process. The following steps will greatly reduce the likelihood of a food related illness.

 Inspect the food to see if there are any signs of contamination or spoilage. Fish, poultry, fruits, and vegetables should be thoroughly washed/rinsed.

 Always wash your hands with soap prior to handling and preparing food. You should also rewash your hands prior to preparing another type of food or when using a new knife/utensil.

 Raw meats, fish, and poultry should be cut on an acrylic cutting board, not wood. Use a wood cutting board for fruits and vegetables only.

 Never serve food on a plate or platter which raw meat, fish, or poultry was cut or prepared on.

 Never let raw meat, fish, and poultry or their juices come in contact with other foods.

 If the work area was cleaned with a dishcloth, always immediately switch to a clean one or use disposable paper towels.

 After cleaning utensils and work areas, an additional measure is to sanitize. This can be done using 2 to 3 teaspoons of household bleach in one quart of water, then thoroughly rinsing with cold water.

 Always cook food thoroughly. Only thorough cooking destroys bacteria. Thermometers are recommended to determine if the internal temperature of the food you are cooking has reached a safe temperature. Internal temperatures should reach 160 degrees. If the food includes poultry, the temperature should reach 185 degrees.

 If serving food for an extended period, hot foods should be kept above 140 degrees and cold foods below 40 degrees.

More information

Additional information is available on the Internet from the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service Home Page at http://www.usda.gov/fsis, or by calling the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555. Another source is your local government Health Department.

Appendix M

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