

## KEEP FOOD SAFE

### Foodborne Illness: Are You at Risk?

When you experience diarrhea, vomiting, an upset stomach, fever or stomach cramps, you may think you have the flu. But the real culprit may be harmful microorganisms called pathogens in the food you ate a few hours, a week, or even a month ago.

Long-term problems, such as kidney disorders, intestinal problems, and reactive arthritis, can result from foodborne illness. In more serious instances, certain bacteria may cause double vision, difficulty swallowing or breathing, and paralysis. Even death can occur. An estimated 4,500 to 6,000 people die each year as a result of foodborne pathogens.

Many people think that only food that looks spoiled, smells bad, or has an off-taste makes us sick. The truth is food containing pathogens may look good, smell good, and taste delicious!

Many places of worship include food as a part of their traditions. These occasions may be potluck dinners for the congregation, money making events such as spaghetti dinners, or providing food for the needy or senior citizens.

Unfortunately, foodborne illness can strike at any of these events. The information provided below will assist you in assuring that food you serve is safe and wholesome.

Although any food can contain harmful organisms, some foods cause more problems than others. As a general rule, foods high in protein – meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products – are more likely to cause problems.

Harmful microorganisms can be anywhere – in the air, on kitchen counters, on clean dishes, on and in the body, and in the food and water we consume. So if pathogens are everywhere and can be on any food even if the food looks good, how can people protect themselves? Following three simple, basic rules for handling food safely:

- Keep food hot.
- Keep food cold.
- Keep food clean.

Pathogens that make us ill are destroyed by heat. Most pathogens are killed when food is cooked well enough. Since



protein foods are more likely to have disease-causing bacteria, cook them to a sufficiently high temperature. Many cookbooks list these internal temperatures. When food is refrigerated or frozen, microorganisms are not destroyed. They just don't multiply at refrigerated or frozen temperatures. When the food is removed from the refrigerator or freezer, the surface temperature begins to rise, making the conditions ideal for growth.

Microorganisms are easily transferred from one item to another. For example, pathogens can hitchhike from your hands to food, or from food to your hands then onto another food. This transfer is called cross-contamination.

You may have been contributing to the risk of foodborne illness without knowing it by improperly handling foods. Many of the techniques that you learned over the years may actually be unsafe. Common unsafe food-handling practices include:

- Thawing food on the kitchen counter.
- Letting food cool on the counter before refrigerating.
- Keeping food at room temperature for longer than two hours (one hour on very hot days).
- Not washing hands adequately before handling food or between handling different kinds of food.

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