

PREVENTING FOOD-BORNE ILLNESS FROM FARM TO PLATE HIGHLIGHTS OF BEST PRACTICE Food Safety in the Home

Consumers have a central role to play in ensuring their own health and safety. Consumers can do a great deal to safeguard their own and their family's health by following certain basic precautions, sometimes described collectively as "good hygienic practices"

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), among the most important causes of food-borne illness are errors in food handling and preparation at home, restaurants and other eating-places. WHO emphasises that "outbreaks of food-borne diseases can be reduced if both professional and domestic food-handlers understand the importance of correct hygienic food practices. Health education is one of the most effective means of reducing the problem".

Health statistics clearly indicate that microbial contamination is the greatest risk to food safety. Public opinion surveys indicate that the consumer is increasingly aware of the danger of microbial contamination as the most important threat to food safety, but the continuing rise in reports of food-borne illness suggest that many people still have little understanding of how to prevent it.

Food Safety Hazards

Data indicates that a few factors are responsible for a large proportion of food-borne disease episodes. Common errors include:

- **Maintaining food in the danger zone:** Food-borne pathogens grow best in temperatures ranging from 5° C to 60° C. This is called the temperature danger zone. Preparation of food long before consumption; leaving prepared food at a temperature that permits bacterial proliferation for too long; or inadequate heating is likely to place food in the danger zone.

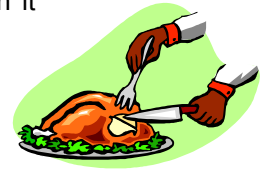


- **Cross-contamination between cooked and raw food:** Bacteria from raw food can contaminate ready-to-eat or contaminated food if the latter is not stored or handled properly. In the refrigerator, ready to eat food and raw food should be properly separated to prevent liquid dripping from raw food to the cooked food. All food should be stored in clean non-toxic washable containers and covered properly.



- **Contamination through handling:** During food preparation, hands, utensils and equipment such as cutting boards can become contaminated with bacteria from raw food. If hands, utensils and equipment are then used to prepare ready-to-eat or cooked food, without first being thoroughly

washed, food can become contaminated. As this food is not likely to be cooked again before being consumed, the bacteria in it will not be destroyed.



Good Hygiene Practices in the Home

Good hygienic practices both in the home and outside have the potential to protect everyone against microbial contamination and the food-borne diseases caused by it. For example, fresh vegetables should always be washed to reduce any possibility of contamination from external sources and chicken and eggs should be adequately cooked to eliminate Salmonella.

"Good hygienic practices" require a basic understanding of the sources of microbes capable of contaminating food, the conditions under which these microbes can multiply to dangerous levels, and how these can be eliminated.

Special Considerations

Pregnant women, babies, young children and the elderly have particular needs which require special care in selecting, storing and preparing food. In general, people with reduced natural defences should be vigilant about protecting themselves against food-borne diseases. People taking certain kinds of drugs including antibiotics and chemotherapy treatment are also more susceptible to microbiological-caused food-borne illness.

Ten Food Safety Tips for the Consumer

Below is a list of 10 essential tips for the consumer to protect against food-borne illness, developed by AFIC.

Shopping -

- "Best before" and "use-by" dates should be taken seriously; out-of-date products should not be purchased and should be reported to store managers. If packaged food is found to have gone "off" before the "best before" date on the package, or if damaged packaging is discovered at home, it should be returned or reported to the retailer or food processor.



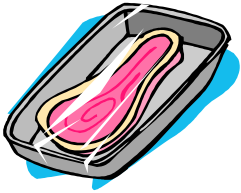
- Adulteration of food involves using inferior, cheaper ingredients to cheat consumers and undercut competition. The sale of misbranded, mislabelled, and contaminated food should be reported to relevant authorities. Reporting incidents can help authorities identify and punish errant retailers and reduce the recurrence of these incidents.

- When choosing where to buy food, make a visual check that staff, cutlery and other equipment looks clean and tidy. This is a good indicator of hygiene standards, including those "behind-the-scenes".



Storage -

- Separate raw foods, especially meat, fish and seafood from cooked food in the refrigerator. Store foods wrapped or properly covered.



- Do not put very hot food in the refrigerator, as this will cause the refrigerator temperature to rise.

- Store cans, packets and bottles in a cool dry place, and protected from insect and rodent pests.

Food Preparation and Eating

- Remember to always wash hands before preparing food or eating.



- Equipment used to prepare raw foods must be washed thoroughly after use and always before being used to prepare foods which are already cooked, or are to be consumed raw.
- Hot food should be very hot, and cold food should be chilled. Avoid any foods left at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Particular care needs to be taken about food prepared in large quantities, in advance or under difficult conditions - at symposia, meetings, large social events, outdoor events, etc.
- If you have any doubts about raw foods, such as fruit and vegetables, the golden rule is "boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it."



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