



Food Safety for Summer Cookouts

It's officially grilling and picnic season which means it's time to talk about food safety. This is not a popular topic, I will admit, but it's extremely important to your health and the health of the people you're feeding. Healthy eating is more than the type and amount of foods you eat. Healthy eating is also preparing foods in a safe way to prevent foodborne illness.

The CDC estimates that each year 48 million people get sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases. Foodborne illness is caused by consuming foods and beverages that contain harmful bacteria, viruses, or parasites. If the contaminated food isn't cooked thoroughly or it is a food we eat without cooking (produce or ready-made salads etc...), we can become anywhere from mildly to severely ill from eating the contaminated food. The problem is, the harmful germs are so small we'd never know if they're unsafe to eat by looking or even smelling the contaminated food.

Hosting the cookout? Here are a couple things to help prevent foodborne illness. Keep any cold food in the fridge until ready to cook or eat. The longer the cold foods sit out, especially in hot weather of 90°F or above, the more potential for bacteria growth to reach an unsafe level. Examples are cut fruits & vegetables, salads (pasta, potato, coleslaw etc...), cheese, and any meat. Gathering outside? Keep food in a cooler packed with ice and place it in the shade if possible. It's best to have separate coolers for beverages and food so the cooler with the food isn't frequently opened.

Avoid cross-contamination by keeping raw meat separate from other foods. When prepping, make sure to switch out for a clean cutting board and knife when going from raw meat to other foods (like produce) and wipe down the surrounding surface area. Also use a clean plate to put the cooked meat on instead of reusing the plate the raw meat was on. It's so easy to contaminate foods, especially ready-to-eat foods, with juice from raw meat.

Cook food to a safe temperature to ensure the harmful germs have been killed. The only way to do this is by using a meat thermometer to check the internal temperature of the food. Unfortunately, judging doneness by color or texture isn't a reliable method. There are a variety of food thermometers and any of them will work! Insert your thermometer in the thickest or most center part of your food (if equal thickness throughout) and check for these minimal internal cooking temps:

Chicken - 165°F

Cuts or pork or beef - 145°F

Brats, hot dogs, hamburgers, pork burgers- 160°F

Traveling to a cookout? Keep the cold food you're bringing in a cooler packed with ice. Keep the cooler in your air-conditioned backseat instead of the hot trunk. You can always throw a food thermometer in your cooler to monitor the temperature and a blanket/towel around the cooler for extra insulation if you have a long drive ahead.

Have a safe and healthy cookout season!