FOOD BORNE ILLNESSES

It is estimated that as many as 76 million people are stricken with food borne illness each year, of which 300,000 are hospitalized and 5000 die. How likely is it that you or your loved ones will be included in these unfortunate statistics? The answer depends...on the status of your immune system and the way you approach and handle the food you eat. While no one can afford to think they are immune, some groups of people have greater difficulty in fighting the nasty culprits that cause food borne illnesses; the young, elderly, pregnant, and immune-compromised folks suffer the greatest consequences.

Symptoms and prevention methods are similar for most food borne infections. Diarrhea, cramping, abdominal pain and sometimes nausea and vomiting are common, and victims often think they have suffered a bout of the flu or a “24 hour bug” without realizing they have become a food borne illness statistic.

Here is a rundown of some of the most common bacterial offenders, and what you can do to protect yourself and your family.

**E. COLI 0157:H7**  Most E Coli strains are harmless, but this one can be fatal. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 73,000 infections are attributable to E. coli 0157:H7 each year. Most infections result from eating uncooked ground beef, but consuming contaminated dairy products, vegetables, unpasteurized juice or even swimming in contaminated water or visiting contaminated petting zoos can introduce infection.

**SALMONELLA** Although 40,000 cases of salmonellosis are reported each year, the CDC estimates the actual number of infections may be 30 or more times greater because milder cases are not diagnosed or reported. Like E. coli, people become infected by eating contaminated foods, usually ground beef, raw eggs (including cookie dough), improperly pasteurized dairy products, undercooked pork and poultry products. Greater risks are associated with summertime, when food may languish in the danger zone (41 to 135 degrees Fahrenheit) for longer periods of time (two hours is the safety limit).

**CAMPYLOBACTER**  *Campylobacter* is one of the most common bacterial causes of diarrheal illness in the United States with more than 1 million people infected each year. Surviving victims may develop arthritis or Guillain-Barre syndrome, an autoimmune disease which can lead to paralysis. Over eighty percent of chickens in the United States are carriers of this bacterium and most cases are associated with handling or eating raw or undercooked poultry.

**LISTERIA**  Pregnant women, newborns and adults with compromised immune system are more vulnerable to this infection, characterized by fever, muscle aches and sometimes nausea or diarrhea. The infection can spread to the nervous system, resulting in headache, confusion, loss
of balance or convulsions. Listeria is usually killed by cooking and pasteurization but can be present in certain ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and deli meats.

**VIBRIO VULNIFICUS** From the same family of bugs that bring cholera, this illness usually comes from eating contaminated seafood causing vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain in healthy people. Immuno-compromised folks may get infection in the bloodstream, resulting in septic shock. Infection can be prevented by avoiding raw oysters or other raw shellfish, and avoiding cross-contamination of cooked seafood and other foods with raw seafood and juices from raw seafood.

**BOTULISM** thrives in environments which lack oxygen, such as improperly canned goods, and produces a nerve toxin that can cause paralysis, including respiratory paralysis. Often found in home canned foods with low acid content, sources can include garlic and oil mixtures stored at room temperature. Also, avoid giving raw honey to infants under the age of one as this can be a source of infection.

Shigella. Food contaminated with Shigella usually comes from water polluted by human sewage or if handled by a person infected with Shigella or by cross-contamination. Because bacteria can survive on raw foods despite aggressive controls at the processing and retail levels, food safety experts urge consumers to take preventative measures at each step in the food handling process—from shopping or bringing takeout foods home to storing leftovers. Most cases of food borne illness can be prevented through careful food handling and storage and by following these four basic steps.

**Clean** -- Wash hands, utensils and surfaces with hot soapy water before and after food preparation, and especially after preparing meat, poultry, eggs or seafood. Using a disinfectant cleaner or a mixture of bleach and water (one teaspoon bleach per quart water) on surfaces and antibacterial soap on hands can provide some added protection. Make it a part of family culture for all family members to wash hands thoroughly before eating…anything!

**Separate** -- Keep raw meat, poultry, eggs and seafood and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods; never place cooked food on an unwashed plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, eggs or seafood.

**Cook** -- Cook food to the proper internal temperatures (this varies for different cuts and types of meat and poultry) and check for doneness with a food thermometer. Cook eggs until both the yolk and white are firm.

**Chill** -- Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared food, leftovers, and take-out foods, within two hours and make sure the refrigerator is set at no higher than 40°F and that the freezer unit is set at 0°F.

Keep these four key ingredients in all your favorite recipes to keep food borne illnesses out!
The Osceola County 4-H Foundation will conduct its annual Orchid Sale fund-raiser on Friday, March 21, 2008 from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM. Four (4) locations are available. You may purchase orchids at Courthouse Square in Kissimmee (off Emmett St.), Osceola County Government Center (Partin Settlement Rd. & E. Rt. 192) in Kissimmee, Osceola Heritage Park (off Bill Beck Blvd.)- Extension Services Building -1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane - Kissimmee., and St. Cloud City Hall at 1300 9th Street in St. Cloud (start time 10:30AM).

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