HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

HOLIDAY FOOD SAFETY

The holidays are a grand time for sumptuous meals, festive feasts, and elaborate buffets. Is it a coincidence that additionally, it seems to be a time when many people are stricken with what they call "stomach flu" Scientists think perhaps not. They say this "flu" is likely to be a foodborne illness, and estimate that each year 76 million cases of it strike people in the United States. Although it is estimated that most cases go undiagnosed, over 300,000 Americans were hospitalized with foodborne illness in 2006.

The only confirmed coincidence is the inadvertent mishandling of food somewhere along the food chain, and the related attacks on the unsuspecting individuals who consume it. The holidays often provide all of the grinch’s favorite ingredients for this perfect storm of a recipe for a culinary disaster.

During the holiday season, traditional hospitality, and numbers of holiday guests, often dictates that very susceptible holiday foods be prepared in larger than normal quantities and left on serving tables for extended periods of time. It is disconcerting to know that many incidences of foodborne illness result from home grown problems: in family kitchens where food preparation, cooking, serving or storage takes a holiday from the constant surveillance required to keep the cup of good cheer safe to drink. It is critical, perhaps even life saving, to reconsider the steps taken in food handling, preparation and storage at home.

Recent outbreaks of foodborne illness, such as the suspicious spinach incidents, or the scourge of those regularly recurring green onion scares, all tend to make us feel helplessly at the mercy of the growers, packers, grocery stores, restaurants and other food supply providers. It is true we do have to depend on their careful surveillance, but despite wide publicity when an outbreak occurs, we still can rest assured of having the safest of food supplies in the world. We must recognize, however, that the final responsibility for the safety of the food on the end of the fork rests in the hand holding it…and in the hands of the cooks in our own homes.

While anyone can be stricken with the inconvenience of a foodborne illness, there are several groups of family members that are particularly vulnerable to more severe repercussions. Young children have not developed the immune system to fight off an attack that an adult’s system can quickly quell, and certain strains of E.coli can cause kidney failure in young children and infants; pregnant members of the family are likewise vulnerable, particularly if they enjoy un-pasteurized cheese or other un-pasteurized products often associated with Listeria which can cause meningitis and stillbirths; elderly members of our families often have immune systems that remain in a weakened state due to medications or age related conditions, as do any members of the family who have a chronic illness or have had a recent hospitalization. And so…there are none! None of us are totally immune from the inconvenience or life-threatening event of a foodborne illness.

There is much we can do however, to make sure the scourge passes by our homes and family. The truth is, we probably don’t have to be one of the unlucky ones with self or family member spending a holiday vacation in the hospital.

Because bacteria can survive on raw foods despite aggressive controls at the processing and retail levels, food safety experts urge consumers to think about food safety at each step in the
food handling process—from shopping or bringing takeout foods home to storing leftovers. Most cases of foodborne illness can be prevented through careful food handling and storage. This means that not only during the holidays, but always, consumers should follow 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 to protect adequately against bacteria. 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 your recipe for holiday food safety and enjoy good health and good cheer into the New Year.

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Date: December 24th, 2006