HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

FOOD SAFETY ON A PICNIC

Summer is here. The days are longer and hotter, families are vacationing, and people are enjoying get-togethers.

There is no better way to celebrate summer than picnicking with friends and family. But caution must be taken when planning and packing for a picnic, because food safety is always a concern. Summer heat can cause bacteria in food to multiply fast, making people sick.

Practicing safe food-handling techniques can prevent food-borne illnesses.

There are four things to remember: clean, cook, chill and separate.

It is important to clean hands, utensils and surfaces often to prevent the spread of bacteria.

Cook food using a food thermometer to make sure it reaches that proper internal temperature.

Chill food quickly at the end of a meal, making sure it doesn't remain at room temperature for more than two hours.

Finally, remember to separate raw meats from other foods to prevent cross-contamination.

To keep food safe when picnicking and at the beach, follow these general tips:

1. Carry food in an insulated cooler. Pack the cooler just before leaving home, placing ice or ice packs around the most perishable foods (meats, seafood, egg and dairy products).
2. Keep the cooler tightly closed until mealtime. This prevents cold air from escaping. It is a good idea to pack snacks or beverages that may be reached for more often in a separate cooler.
3. Keep the cooler cool. The cooler should ride up front with you instead of in the trunk and be put in a shady place at the picnic site, if possible.
4. Wash hands before handling foods. Towelettes are a good idea if the park or beach has nowhere to wash hands.
5. Do not let your food sit out - remove it from your cooler shortly before serving and always place it back inside the cooler immediately after the meal. This will help to prevent any potential growth of bacteria.
6. Find a spot away from trash containers - flies and other pest can carry bacteria and transfer it to your food.

These tips can also be applied for outdoor grilling and barbecues. If you plan to serve a large crowd and have cold salads on the menu, obtain a large bowl or pan of ice to place under the salad dish.

As always with any kind of food, keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot and keep them all out of the danger zone, 40° to 140°. This is the range at which bacteria grow the best.

Also remember the two-hour rule: Food should not be left in the danger zone for more than two hours. If you are outside and the temperature is 90° or higher, don't leave food in the danger zone for more than an hour.

When preparing to grill (or do any kind of cooking), remember to defrost meat in the refrigerator or in the microwave. If defrosting in the microwave make sure you're going to cook immediately afterward. Don't defrost meat at room temperature on the kitchen counter.
Marinating needs to be done in the refrigerator, not at room temperature on the counter. After grilling meat to the proper internal temperature and checking with a meat thermometer, make sure to place the meat on a clean plate to prevent cross contamination with raw meat juices and the cooked product.

When fishing, bring plenty of ice and keep the cooler shaded or covered with a blanket. Keep fish live on a stringer or in a live well, or gut and scale the fish and wrap them in plastic wrap and store them on ice. If fish aren't going to be eaten within a day or two, freeze them.

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