Spring is here, the days are longer and hotter, family vacations are being planned and all of those fun filled picnics are just around the corner. What a better way to celebrate spring than an outdoor picnic with friends and family! Just as when preparing any kind of food, caution must be taken when planning and packing for a picnic. Food safety is always a concern. Spring and summer heat can cause bacteria in food to multiply fast, leading to food-borne illness. You may be thinking "Ah, this cannot happen to me," and you may be correct, IF you practice safe food handling techniques.

Foodborne illness can be prevented!

To keep food safe when picnicking, follow these general tips:

- 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, eggs and dairy products).
- 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.
- 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.
- Wash hands before handling foods. Towelettes are a good idea if no hand-washing facility is available at the park or beach.
- Do not let your food sit out - remove it from your cooler shortly before serving and always place it back into the cooler immediately after the meal is finished. This will help to prevent any potential growth of bacteria.

The above tips can also be applied for outdoor grilling and BBQs. If you plan on serving a large crowd and have cold salads on the menu obtain a large bowl or pan of ice to place under the salad dish. This will keep your salads cold and safe while everyone is eating. As always with any kind of food we want to keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot and keep them all out of the danger zone, 40°F - 140°F. This is the range at which food borne illness-causing bacteria grows the best. If you are outside and the temperature is 90°F or greater then do not leave your food in the danger zone for more than one hour. If the temperature is less than 90°F then the food should be left in the danger zone no longer than two hours. The following information discusses some specific actions you can take when grilling or going to the beach to picnic.

When preparing to grill (or do any kind of cooking) remember to defrost your meat in the refrigerator or in the microwave. If defrosting in the microwave make sure you are going to cook immediately afterwards. DO NOT defrost your meat at room temperature on the kitchen counter. Marinate meat in the refrigerator, not at room temperature on the counter. After grilling your meat to the proper internal temperature and checking with a meat thermometer make sure that you place the meat on a clean plate. You want to prevent any cross contamination with raw meat juices and the cooked product.

When picnicking at the beach remember the following tips:

- Find a spot away from trash containers - flies and other pests can carry bacteria and transfer it to your food.
- Keep your coolers in the shade or under an umbrella. You can cover it with blankets to help insulate it further or even bury it in the sand.
- If you have leftovers, place them in the cooler immediately after eating. If there is still plenty of ice in the cooler when you get home then leftovers are safe to keep, otherwise throw them out.
Enjoy your picnics and BBQs. By following a few simple guidelines you will have a great time, but always remember "If in Doubt, Throw it Out!" It is always better to be safe than sorry because the bacteria that causes food borne illness cannot be detected through taste, sight or smell.

Food Service managers and employees can call us about our upcoming Food Manager Certification Class and Employee Food Safety Training. If you have any further questions or concerns or would like more information on this topic or many others, please contact your local Cooperative Extension Office. In Osceola County contact Mary Beth Salisbury, msal2@osceola.orgFamily & Consumer Sciences, (321) 697-3000.

Mary Beth Salisbury
Family Consumer & Services
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
msal2@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
Date:April 21st, 2002