

SAFEGUARDING YOUR FOOD

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SAFEGUARDING YOUR FOOD

Every year, an estimated 7 million Americans suffer from cases of foodborne illness. Some cases are violent and even result in death. Of course this is commonly known as "food poisoning." The culprit is food that has dangerously high levels of bacteria due to improper cooking or handling.

Food safety is usually taken for granted by the buying public but everyone's attention was recently directed to food poisoning involving some meat that was undercooked. It was determined that the problem never would have happened if the meat had been cooked properly. E.Coli 0157.H7 is a potent virus, but it can be completely destroyed when the meat is fully cooked.

It is important for consumers to take an all-around safety approach to purchasing, storing and preparing both traditional and new meat and poultry products. Ultimately, consumers and food handlers bear the responsibility for keeping food safe once it leaves the store.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, about 85 percent of foodborne illness cases could be avoided each year if consumers would handle food properly. The most common foodborne illnesses are caused by a combination of bacteria, naturally present in the environment, and food handling mistakes. Ironically, these are also the easiest types of foodborne illnesses to prevent. Proper cooking or processing of raw meat and poultry kills bacteria that can cause foodborne illness.

When you're out, grocery shop last, take food straight home to the refrigerator. And never leave food in a hot car! Don't buy anything you won't use before the use-by date. Don't buy food in poor condition. Make sure refrigerated food is cold to the touch. Frozen food should be rock-solid. Canned goods should be free of dents, cracks or bulging lids which can indicate a serious food poisoning threat.

The performance and maintenance of your refrigerator is of the utmost importance. Check the temperature of your refrigerator with an appliance thermometer. To keep bacteria in check, the refrigerator should run at 40 degrees F; the freezer unit at 0 degrees F. Generally, keep your refrigerator as cold as possible without freezing your milk or lettuce. When you prepare food, keep everything clean and thaw out any frozen food you plan to prepare in your refrigerator. Take it out of the freezer in advance and place it in the refrigerated section of your refrigerator. Always wash your hands in hot soapy water before preparing and handling any food as well as after you use the bathroom, change diapers, handle pets, etc. Remember, too, that bacteria can live in your kitchen towels, sponges and dish cloths. Wash them often and replace the dish cloths and sponges you use regularly every few weeks.

Be absolutely sure that you keep all raw meats, poultry and fish and their juices away from other food. For instance, wash your hands, your cutting board and knife in hot soapy water after cutting up the chicken and before dicing salad ingredients. It is best to use plastic cutting boards rather than wooden ones where bacteria can hide in grooves. Don't take your food out of the freezer and leave it on the kitchen counter to thaw. This is extremely dangerous since the bacteria can grow in the outer layers of the food before the inside thaws. It is wise to do your marinating in the

refrigerator too.