



Date: July 2, 2008

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Health officials stress proper food-handling on hot summer days

Danger lurks in those stacks of hamburger patties and mounds of chicken setting beside the barbecue grill in the hot summer sun.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 76 million cases of food-borne illness occur in the U.S. each year with 300,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.

Emilio DeBess, epidemiologist with the Oregon Department of Human Service State Public Health Division, says temperature is a key factor in preventing food-borne illness during carefree summer outings. Hamburger, chicken and other raw foods can be contaminated with small amounts of bacteria such as E. coli, and Salmonella which can cause severe food poisoning.

DeBess warns chefs to be especially careful to monitor the temperature of foods they're preparing for barbecues during warm weather.

Foods should be kept cold until they're ready to be cooked. And the foods should be cooked thoroughly to prevent the spread of illness. Hamburgers and chicken should be cooked until all the pink is gone from the center of the meat.

To be certain of the proper cooking temperature, cooks should use an instant-read thermometer and cook all hamburgers to at least 155 degrees F.

Chicken should be cooked to at least 170 degrees F for white meat and 180 degrees for dark meat. Pork should be cooked to 160 degrees.

To avoid contamination, raw meat should be stored away from other foods like salads, which won't be cooked.

DeBess stresses the importance of common-sense measures like washing hands before preparing meals and keeping cooking utensils clean, washing them between uses. This can take extra effort at a campsite or picnic area where water is not readily available, but cleanliness is the first line of defense against illness.

One common mistake is to use utensils that have touched raw meat to stir other foods. That can contaminate food with microscopic bacteria from the raw meat. Also, do not let juices from raw meat drip onto salads or onto places where other foods are prepared. Remember to wash cutting boards with soap and water between uses.

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