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Foodborne illness is no picnic

Stanton~ With summertime quickly approaching and backyard barbeques and family picnics on the horizon, the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) would like to take the opportunity to reinforce the importance of proper food handling and inform district residents that food safety should always be on the front burner. People need to know simple steps they can take to prevent foodborne illness.

“As the temperature rises, so does the risk of foodborne illness. Hot, humid weather creates the perfect conditions for the rapid growth of bacteria,” said Kimberly Singh, Health Officer for MMDHD. “Summer also means more people are cooking outside at picnics, barbeques and camping trips, without easy access to refrigeration and washing facilities to keep food safe.”

The most common types of foodborne illnesses are those caused by the bacteria *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella* and *E coli*, and by a group of viruses called calicivirus, also known as Norovirus.

“Many food-related illnesses go unreported due to the mistaken belief that it is just the ‘24 hour flu,’ said Singh. “Common foodborne illness symptoms consist of nausea, vomiting and diarrhea and on average last 24 to 48 hours.”

To minimize the risks of foodborne illness, follow these four easy steps when handling and preparing food:

Step One – Clean

Wash hands and surfaces often to avoid the spread of bacteria.

- Wash hands with hot, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before handling food, and after handling raw meats or poultry, using the bathroom, touching pets or changing diapers.
- Always wash raw fruits and vegetables in clean water. You cannot tell whether foods carry surface bacteria by the way they look, smell or taste.

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Step Two – Separate

Keep raw meats and poultry separate from cooked foods to avoid cross-contamination.

- When you pack a cooler for an outing, wrap uncooked meats and poultry securely, and put them on the bottom to prevent raw juices from dripping onto other foods.
- Wash all plates, utensils, and cutting boards that touched or held raw meat or poultry before using them again for cooked foods.

Step Three – Cook

Make sure you kill harmful bacteria by properly cooking food.

- Traditional visual cues like color are not a guarantee that food is safe. Don't guess! Take a digital instant-read food thermometer along to check when meat and poultry are safe to eat. Cooked foods are safe to eat when internal temperatures are:
 - 155° F for 15 seconds for ground beef
 - 145° F for 15 seconds for beef steak
 - 165° F for 15 seconds for poultry
 - 145° F for 15 seconds for pork chops/steak

Step Four - Chill: Keep cold food cold.

- Perishable foods that are normally in the refrigerator, such as luncheon meats, cooked meat, chicken, and potato or pasta salads, must be kept in an insulated cooler with freezer packs or blocks of ice to keep the temperature at or near 40° F.
- Put leftovers back in the cooler as soon as you are finished eating.
- The simple rule is: When in doubt, throw it out.

For more information on proper food handling visit the United States Department of Agriculture website at www.usda.gov or call MMDHD at 989-831-3607 in Montcalm County, 989-875-1002 in Gratiot County and 989-227-3110 in Clinton County.

Mid-Michigan District Health Department serves the residents of Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm Counties.

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