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Foodborne illness is no picnic

Ithaca, Stanton St. Johns- It's that time of year when family and friends gather together at graduation open houses, picnics, family reunions and backyard barbeques. Warmer temperatures definitely help make these events more enjoyable, but also present opportunities for foodborne illness to thrive. As food heats up in summer's sizzling temperatures, bacteria can multiply rapidly.

Eating foodborne bacteria can cause illness within as little as 20 minutes or up to three days of eating contaminated food. Symptoms can include: vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain—and flu-like symptoms, such as fever, headache, and body ache. Most people recover from a foodborne illness within a short period of time, but some can develop sever problems.

This scenario can spell disaster and put a damper on an otherwise enjoyable time, so safe food handling when eating outdoors is critical.

The first step to safe food handling is to clean: Wash hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food, and after using the bathroom, handling pets or changing diapers. Always rinse raw fruits and vegetables under running water, and avoid cross-contamination by cleaning counters, cutting boards, utensils and dishes with hot soapy water after preparing each item.

The second step is to separate: Separate raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs from other foods. Use one cutting board for fresh produce and a separate one for raw meat, poultry and seafood. Never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs unless the plate has been washed in hot, soapy water. When packing a cooler, wrap uncooked meats and poultry separately, and put them on the bottom to prevent raw juices from dripping onto other foods. A separate cooler for storing raw food is ideal.

The third step is to kill harmful bacteria by cooking food to the right temperature: Visual cues, like color, are not a guarantee that food is safe. Don't guess! Use a metal stemmed thermometer to check when meat and poultry are safe to eat. Foods are safe to eat when internal temperatures are145^{o}F for chops, roasts and steak; 165°F for Poultry; and 160°F for ground meat.

The fourth step is to keep cold food cold. Perishable foods normally kept in the refrigerator must be kept in a cooler with freezer packs or ice to keep the temperature at or near 40° F. Also put leftovers back in the refrigerator or cooler as soon as you are done eating. The simple rule is: When in doubt, throw it out!

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