

In Good Health

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SUMMERTIME FOOD SAFETY: PROTECTING YOUR PICNIC

Ahhh Summer! It means many different things to many different people. For almost everyone, Summer includes picnics, cookouts and eating outdoors. While these activities can be extremely fun and enjoyable, they also have the potential to make you very sick. Food borne illness can occur if picnic foods are not handled safely, so make sure food safety is a part of your planning for any outdoor eating activity.

Why is picnic food hazardous? According to NCSU Food Safety Specialist Angela M. Fraser, PhD, picnic food is particularly hazardous for three main reasons:

1. Food receives a lot of handling. Picnic foods—such as potato or macaroni salads, sandwich fillings, hamburger patties and cut watermelon—often receive a lot of handling during preparation. Handling increases the risk of contamination with harmful bacteria.
2. Food is not cooled rapidly after cooking. Some common picnic foods require precooking and are prepared in large quantities. Cooked foods must be rapidly cooled by putting in shallow pans and refrigerating immediately after cooking so harmful bacteria does not grow. Warm temperatures promote bacterial growth.
3. Equipment to keep hot food hot and cold food cold is usually not used and food sits out for long periods of time. Warm temperatures support the growth of harmful bacteria. The longer food is at warm temperatures, the more likely food borne illness will result.

What can I do to keep picnic food safe?

Sanitize preparation tools and serve fresh food. Wash your hands well when handling and preparing food, and be sure utensils and cutting surfaces are clean to avoid contaminating food with harmful bacteria. When preparing melon, wash the melon rinds before you begin slicing. Since bacteria can live on a melon rind, the knife can easily drag the bacteria right into the edible melon during the preparation process.



Also, if you are planning ahead, do not cook food days in advance unless the food will be frozen for storage. Storing refrigerated food for long periods of time allows for a greater opportunity for bacteria to grow.

Consider your picnic packaging needs.

If you are packing food for transport to your picnic, be sure to keep cold foods cold, and hot foods hot. Ideally, foods need to be kept out of the “danger zone” (between 40°F – 140° F). When packing cold food, use an insulated cooler and enough ice to

keep the temperature below 40°F. If you do not have the ability to keep foods in the safe temperature zone, consider low risk alternatives that do not need refrigeration such as peanut butter sandwiches, dried fruit, nuts, unpeeled fresh fruit (apples, oranges, bananas), jelly sandwiches, unopened cans of food (meat, fish or fruit), cookies, cakes and crackers.

Practice good grilling.

The USDA recommends that all grilled meat be cooked thoroughly to a safe minimum temperature to destroy harmful bacteria. Meat and poultry cooked on a grill can turn brown and appear done on the outside while still remaining undercooked on the inside. Use a food thermometer to be sure the food has reached a safe minimum internal temperature. Beef, veal and lamb steaks, roasts and chops should be cooked to 145 °F; hamburgers made of ground beef and all cuts of pork should reach 160 °F; and all poultry should reach a minimum of 165 °F.

Clean up carefully.

If you have a lot of leftovers, you may be tempted to put them back in the fridge for another meal. Use caution! Remember that multiple people may have handled the food, and if it was left out for more than one hour, it is probably not good. If the food remained in a cooler and the ice has not melted, it is probably fine to save. Remember: “When in doubt, throw it OUT!”

Have a safe and wonderful Summer!

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