

Food Safety for the 4th of July and for that matter All Summer Outings!

One uninvited guest will ruin many people's picnics this summer — food poisoning bacteria.

There are 76 million reported illnesses in the United States alone each year, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). And six to eight million result in death.

Those cases more than double during the summer months as the hot weather promotes bacteria growth on foods like coleslaw sitting out in the sun.

"The good news is the most cases are preventable with proper care," noted Dr. Anthony Hilton, a microbiologist with Aston University in Birmingham, England.

Of the diagnosed incidents of food-borne illness with an identified cause, fifty-five percent are the result of improper cooking and storage and 24% are from poor hygiene (not washing hands before and during food handling). Only 3% are due to an unhealthy food source.

Still, three percent of 76 million is over two million poisonings a year.

According to Robert Tauxe, MD, deputy director at the CDC, most of the prevalent cases of mass food contamination in the US have been from produce. (Remember last year's e-coli-tainted spinach and Taco-Bell's diseased lettuce?)

"Produce that grows close to the soil tends to be more susceptible, including leafy greens, tomatoes, green onions/scallions," he said. Cantaloupe is especially vulnerable.

To minimize risk, Dr. Tauxe advises consumers to avoid bagged, premixed vegetables and fruits. "All that cutting, chopping, packing and mixing of produce from many places increases the chances of contamination."

He also suggests that all produce, even the 'triple-washed' ones, are scrubbed in your own sink at home before eating.

The majority of potential food poisonings can be eliminated with cleanliness and by following a few other food rules.

1. "It is imperative that chilled food is properly stored in the refrigerator," said Dr. Hilton. Overloading the fridge will prevent cold air from circulating and not keep food chilled.
2. Keep raw meats at the bottom of the fridge so that juices do not drip onto other foods. Always cook meat thoroughly. Juices should run clear. No pink meat inside.
3. Wash your hands and kitchen surfaces often. Do not use the same utensils on raw and cooked foods.
4. Do not leave food out for more than two hours. Food should be reheated only once and it needs to be fully re-cooked, not just warmed.
5. If you see mold or fungus on food, do not trim it away. Discard the entire food. For every bit of contamination you see, there are more bacteria you can not see.
6. Be extra careful when serving the elderly, young children, pregnant women or anyone with a compromised immune system. They are most susceptible to food illnesses.
7. Thaw foods in the refrigerator or microwave. Marinate foods in the refrigerator.
8. These foods need extra caution: Eggs — cook until the yolks are firm. Never eat anything containing raw egg. Cheese — keep refrigerated until serving. Take special care with soft varieties. Fruit juice — only drink pasteurized. Milk and other dairy products — again, pasteurized and chilled. Do not ignore the 'sell by' date.

Some food poisoning can be severe. It may cause meningitis, miscarriage, paralysis or even death.

Most cases are mild. Symptoms include diarrhea, nausea, a slight fever and vomiting that starts within two to 24 hours after the bacteria was ingested. The best treatment is bed rest and plenty of fluids.

And with proper food handling, the only uninvited guest at your summer picnic this year will be the nosy neighbor.