

Beware - Season ripe for food poisoning

By Dr. Jim Pfaff

Just when many people are enjoying picnics or casual meals prepared on the barbecue, the news of an E. coli outbreak among some of those who attended a picnic in a Scarborough park is a sharp reminder that summer is also a season ripe for food poisoning.

The bacteria that can cause food poisoning thrive in warm weather. Raw protein-rich foods like meat, fish, dairy products, poultry and eggs can provide the perfect setting for bacteria to grow unseen, without a bad odour or taste to warn unsuspecting diners.

Hamburger is a concern because it can be contaminated by E. coli O157:H7 bacteria somewhere along the line from the meat processing plant to the grill. These bacteria of Walkerton fame can cause symptoms of watery, bloody diarrhea and acute abdominal cramps. Some people, especially the very young, elderly and those with weakened immune systems may experience kidney problems. In rare cases it can cause death.

Raw chicken can be home to the

Salmonella and Campylobacter bacteria, which can cause symptoms that include nausea, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, fever and headache.

Symptoms can be more severe in the elderly, infants and those who are already sick.

The best defence from foodborne illnesses is to assume all foods, especially raw foods - meats, fruits and vegetables - can have bacteria, parasites and viruses present. However, a few food safety measures will help prevent illness.

Before you pack your cooler, wash it with a mild soap and bleach-water solution (2 ml bleach to 1 litre of water) and rinse well with cold water. This will sanitize and pre-chill the cooler. Raw meats should be stored in a separate cooler away from foods like fruit, cheese and lettuce.

Load your cooler with frozen ice packs, ice blocks or ice cubes (don't use these cubes for your drinks!). You can also freeze juice and milk in their containers, which will help keep foods cold.

When you are preparing food, clean your work area often. Frequent hand washing with warm soapy water before and after handling raw meats and before touching other foods and utensils is a must-do task.

Wash raw fruits and vegetables well and always keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot.

E. coli and other bacteria that cause food poisoning are killed when cooked to the proper temperatures. Colour alone is not a good measure of safety.

Use a meat thermometer to check that burgers are cooked in the centre to 71C (160F) and that chicken pieces reach 74C (165F).

Cook whole chicken to 82C (180F). These meats should not be pink in the middle and juices should run clear.

Take care to make sure serving platters and equipment like basting brushes or tongs used on uncooked meat do not touch any food that is ready to eat. Any bacteria from the uncooked meat could contaminate your meal. Put cooked foods on a clean plate -

never put it back on the plate that held uncooked meat or poultry. Chill any leftovers promptly.

Whether you are at a campground, the cottage, a beach or picnic, putting some thought into your meal planning and preparation will help keep everyone healthy.

For more tips on keeping your food safe, check www.simcoemuskokakealth.org or call Your Health Connection at 705-721-7520 (1-877-721-7520) and speak with a

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