



## **SAFE FOOD HANDLING**

Despite the fact that the United States has the safest food supply in the world, it is not invincible. In Illinois, it is estimated that as many as 250,000 cases of foodborne illness may occur each year. However, because these illnesses can be quite mild and because the vast majority of them occur in the home, many go unreported. Yet, foodborne illnesses can lead to serious complications and even death. Therefore, how you handle food in your home can mean the difference between health and illness.

The following suggestions will help you to select, store and prepare foods properly.

### **Selecting Food at the Store**

If you have a number of errands to run in addition to shopping for food, be sure to make the grocery store your last stop. If possible, keep a cooler in your car for transporting refrigerated or frozen items. Take food items home immediately and put them in your refrigerator or freezer. NEVER leave food in a hot vehicle!

Check use-by dates and make sure you can use the food by those dates.

Make sure the food items you buy are in good condition. Refrigerated food should be cold to the touch. Frozen foods should be solid. Canned goods should not be dented, cracked or bulging. Produce should appear fresh. Meat should have a good color and be firm to the touch.

### **Storing Food at Home**

To keep bacteria from rapidly reproducing, be sure your refrigerator is set at the proper temperature. (If you think your refrigerator is not maintaining the correct temperature, get an appliance thermometer from a hardware store and check the accuracy of the temperature setting.) To keep bacteria in check, the refrigerator should run at 40 degrees F, the freezer unit at 0 degrees F. A good general rule to follow is to keep the refrigerator as cold as possible without freezing milk or lettuce.

If you don't plan to use it within a few days, freeze fresh meat, poultry or fish.

When refrigerating raw meat, poultry or fish, be sure to place the package on a plate so that their juices do not drip on other food. Raw juices can contain bacteria.

Always keep eggs in the refrigerator.

### **Preparing Food**

Be sure to wash your hands in warm soapy water before preparing food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers and handling pets.

Kitchen towels, sponges and cloths can harbor bacteria. Wash them often and replace sponges every few weeks.

Keep raw meat, poultry and fish and their juices away from other food. For example, after cutting up meat or poultry, be sure to wash your hands, the knife and the cutting board in hot soapy water before you start to dice salad ingredients.

Thaw food in the microwave or in the refrigerator. DO NOT thaw items on the kitchen counter. This allows bacteria to grow in the outer layers of the food before the inside thaws. If you plan to marinate food, do it in the refrigerator, too.

### **Cooking Food**

Thorough cooking kills harmful bacteria. If you eat meat, poultry, fish, oysters or eggs that are raw or only partially cooked, you may be exposing yourself to bacteria that can make you ill. This is particularly important for children, pregnant women, the elderly, and those whose immune systems are compromised by illness or by medical treatment (for example, chemotherapy).

Salmonella, a bacteria that causes food poisoning, can grow inside fresh, unbroken eggs. Be sure to cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm, not runny. Scramble eggs to a firm texture. Avoid recipes in which eggs remain raw or only partially cooked (for example, mousse, egg drinks, Caesar salad, etc.). Pasteurized eggs or egg substitute can be used instead.

### **Safe Microwaving**

While microwaves are great time savers, they can leave cold spots in food. Bacteria can survive in these spots.

Be sure to cover food with a lid or plastic wrap so steam can help to promote thorough cooking. Vent plastic wrap and make sure it doesn't touch the food.

Stir and rotate food for even cooking. If your microwave does not have a turntable, rotate the dish by hand once or twice during the cooking time.

Observe the standing time called for in a recipe or on package directions. During the standing time, the food finishes cooking.

Use an oven temperature probe or a meat thermometer to check that food is done. Be sure to check several spots.

### **Serving Food**

Never leave perishable food unrefrigerated for more than two hours. Bacteria that can cause food poisoning grow quickly at warm temperatures.

Always use clean dishes and utensils to serve food, not those you used to prepare the food. If you grill food, serve it on a clean plate, not on the one that held the raw meat, poultry or fish.

Pack lunches in insulated carriers with a cold pack. Be sure your children know not to leave lunches in direct sunlight or on warm radiators.

Carry picnic food in a cooler with a cold pack. Try to keep the cooler in the shade and do not open the lid any more than is necessary.

If you have a party, keep cold food on ice or keep refrigerated until time to replenish platters. If serving hot food, maintain it at 140 degrees F or divide into smaller serving platters, which can be refrigerated until time to warm them up for serving.