

Safety in the Catering Kitchen

By Carolyn Moore

Could you, your staff and your kitchen pass a food safety test? If you or your volunteer group is in the business of catering to social events, organizing community suppers or simply hosting a monthly meeting, this is a question you should answer.

Despite years of research and education to make sure the food consumers eat is safer than ever before, the incidence of food poisoning remains high. The Ontario Ministry of Health estimates that one in six people (or 1,500,000 Ontarions) suffer from food poisoning each year. Many people do not know they have been a victim, and instead put their fever, nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhea down to a case of the flu. Consequently, except for large outbreaks in nursing homes, restaurants and other institutions, most cases of food poisoning and their cause go unreported. For example, for each case reported, an estimated 25 go unreported.

Food poisonings are caused from high levels of microorganisms such as Salmonella, Staphylococcus aureus, Clostridium perfringens, Campylobacter and E.coli in foods. Microorganisms are found everywhere - in the soil, water, sewage and animals. Although good hygiene and sanitary conditions can minimize their spread through the environment, it is impossible to prevent their contamination of food.

Given the right conditions, microorganisms in food can multiply to levels that will make you sick. One bacteria can multiply to more than one million in three and a half hours, given time, warm temperatures, moisture and a source of nourishment.

Some foods are more susceptible to the growth of food poisoning microorganisms than others. Health and Welfare Canada consider the following list of foods as being "potentially unsafe" unless proper heat (above 140F) or refrigeration (below 40F) is maintained:

- raw and cooked meat, poultry, fish, and salads made from them
- cooked vegetables, peas and beans

- cooked cereals, such as rice and oatmeal dressings
- custards, puddings, and whipped cream
- processed meats, such as bologna, hot dogs and ham
- gravies
- meat sandwich spreads
- all canned foods and combination dinners after opening
- eggs
- soft cheeses

Foods that are high in sugar, acid and/or salt are usually considered safe, as are dried foods.

Most cases of food poisoning are traced to situations involving poor hygiene, such as not washing one's hands with soap after using the washroom, and inadequate cooking, serving or storage procedures.

Not refrigerating cooked turkey and roasts, leaving big pots of soup to cool at room temperatures, cross contaminating other foods with raw poultry and meat, and leaving sandwiches unrefrigerated for extended periods of time are all practices which can lead to food poisoning.

The fortunate part of this story is that food poisoning can be prevented through safe food handling procedures. The following are some basic rules of safe food handling:

1. Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold

Bacteria grow best between 40F and 140F. You need to keep "potentially unsafe" foods out of this temperature range. If you are serving a meal buffet style, serve foods in shallow containers and replenish them often. Use hot trays to keep foods hot. And serve cold foods on ice if possible.

All foods should be cooled in the refrigerator. Large quantities of food such as chili, spaghetti sauce, puddings, gravies, lasagna and stews take a long time to cool. It is recommended that foods be divided into smaller amounts to hasten cooling.

2. Cook foods to the recommended internal temperature

An accurate thermometer is a caterer's best friend. Use it to make sure the centre of roasts, poultry and other foods are

thoroughly cooked. Gravies and sauces take a long time to become hot in the centre and should be stirred often.

3. Prevent cross contamination

Avoid letting raw food products, such as poultry and meat, come into contact with other foods, such as fruits and vegetables. Thoroughly clean and sanitize cutting boards and utensils after cutting raw meat. Wooden cutting boards are particularly hard to clean and should be replaced with heavy plastic ones. Wrap and store foods carefully in the refrigerator to prevent meat juices from dripping onto other foods.

4. Thaw potentially unsafe foods in the refrigerator

Thawing at room temperature is not recommended.

5. Keep workspace and equipment clean

Clean and sanitize all dishes, equipment, sinks and work surfaces. This is especially important if you have been handling raw poultry.

6. Practise good hygiene

Be sure to wash your hands after preparing raw poultry and meats, going to the washroom, handling diapers, sneezing, coughing, touching your hair or face, or handling poisonous chemicals. And avoid handling or preparing food while you are ill and wear disposable gloves if you have cuts or sores on your hands.

The costs of taking a risk with food safety are high - to your reputation as a food caterer, to the victims who must suffer through the consequences, and to the health care system. If you or your group are in the catering business, consult your local Public Health Inspector for further information on safe food handling. Check the blue pages in your telephone directory for the number of the Public Health Unit Office in your area.

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Correction

On page 10 of the last issue of the Home & Country magazine it was incorrectly reported that Mary Millson of Jean Scott was presented a Certificate of Merit. It should have read Mary Millson of the Village of People Branch.

