

## How safe are your food handling practices?



Canadians tend to greatly underestimate the risk of food-borne illness says Bonnie Lacroix, a Dietician who is currently doing graduate research at the University of Guelph on consumer food handling behaviour. "Anyone who is sick for a day and thinks they have the 24-hour flu," says Lacroix, "is probably suffering from food-borne illness."

Lacroix lists five common food-handling errors:

- 1. Cross Contamination** – Cooking to a safe temperature destroys harmful bacteria, but touching the food after cooking with a reused knife or serving utensil can recontaminate it. Wiping a countertop, cutting board or plate with a used dishcloth or sponge just spreads the bacteria that have been quickly multiplying in a warm, moist environment.
- Failure to Wash Hands Before Handling Food** – Just as animals can harbour harmful forms of E.coli and other bacteria in their intestinal tract, so can humans and household pets.
- 3. Not Refrigerating Leftovers** – The number one source of food-borne illness is food left at room temperature for more than an hour or two.
- 4. Presuming Some Foods are Safe** – Raw fruits and vegetables can be more dangerous than meat, which is usually cooked before eating.
- 5. Not Using a Food Thermometer for All Cooking** – A thermometer is the only way to be sure food has reached a safe temperature.

Like most Canadians, Home Economist Joyce Parslow admits she used to rely on a thermometer only when cooking a large item, such as a turkey, to make sure that the stuffing had reached a safe temperature, or to ensure roasts were done the way she liked them. "But for hamburgers, meat loaf or casseroles," she said, "I decided when the meat was cooked by how



Then Parslow learned about a United States Department of Agriculture study that proved that appearance isn't a reliable indicator. "Beef burgers may be brown in the centre before reaching a safe temperature or they can remain pink even after proper cooking. That's when I realized," noted Parslow, "the importance of using a food thermometer even when cooking hamburgers or chicken pieces."

Parslow recently authored a new booklet, *Food Safety at Home – You're in Control*. Supported by the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education, the Kidney Foundation of Canada and the Environmental Health Foundation of Canada, the free booklet is one of the first sources of solid facts on food thermometers for Canadian consumers.

Before the booklet was published, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada tested 16 brands of thermometers and doneness indicators. Digital probe-type or fork thermometers that show an actual temperature reading proved to be the best buy and most accurate when cooking thin meats, such as a hamburger, minute steak or pork chop. The problem with forks that show a doneness level, but no temperature reading is that the ranges vary from one model to another and did not always match current Canadian Industry Standards.

When using a food thermometer, insert the temperature stem or fork tines at least 4 cm (1 1/2 inches) for an accurate reading. For thin meats, such as a pork chop, chicken leg or hamburger, you need to hold the meat with tongs and insert the thermometer sideways into each piece.

To learn more about safe handling of all foods, the correct ways to use food thermometers and safe doneness temperatures for meat and poultry, order the free booklet *Food Safety at Home – You're in Control* by calling 1-888-248-2333, or through the Beef Information Centre's website at [www.beefinfo.org](http://www.beefinfo.org)

Source: Beef Information Centre, Mississauga, Ontario.

## Couple Recognized for Volunteerism



Anne and Don McGugan were two of 17 recipients from across Ontario of an Agri-Food & Rural Communities Volunteer Recognition Award. The couple operates a 450-acre cash crop farm in Brooke Township and was recognized by the University of Guelph for their contribution to the promotion of farming and agricultural issues. Together they chaired the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Lambton Federation of Agriculture last August.

Anne has served as the Secretary of the Brooke & Alvington Agricultural Society, a community representative on the Brooke Central School Council, a 4-H leader and was active in the township and county Junior Farmers. Anne also assists with Agriculture in the Classroom and farm tours.

Currently, Anne is a member of Sunny Brooke WI in Lambton North and a Provincial Advisory Councillor for Subdivision 20. She has held offices at Branch, District and Area levels. She serves as a member of the Education Committee for FWIO and is their alternate representative to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture.

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Photo courtesy of the *Watford Guide-Advocate*.