



Isle heat increases need for care in handling food

In so many ways, Hawaii deserves the "Health State" moniker. But when it comes to food-borne diseases, Hawaii ranks among the worst in the nation. Our year-round warm climate is friendly to harmful microbes that thrive in foods. Add to this a local culture of frequent outdoor celebrations, and these invisible invaders have ample opportunity.

Question: What types of foods are most likely to support the growth of dangerous microorganisms?

Answer: In general, high-protein foods with high water content provide the best environment for these inconspicuous intruders. These include meats, chicken, fish, grains and beans. But just about any food can become contaminated. Though unusual, even melons and berries have made people sick.

Q: How can picnic foods be kept as safe as possible?

A: Think about food safety from the store to the mouth at each step of handling, storing, preparing and serving. Here are the key provisions:

» When shopping, buy cold

foods last and rush them home. Keep cold foods cold and frozen foods well frozen. Keep meats in bags separate from produce, and place cold foods in an ice chest if they will be in the shopping cart and car longer than 20 minutes.

» The temperature of your refrigerator should be between 34 and 40 degrees, and the freezer should be at or below zero degrees. Use fresh meat and poultry in three to four days and ground meats and fish in one to two days.

» Keep everything clean. Wash hands with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds before handling food. Rewash if you touch your face, scratch your head, shake someone's hand, pet an animal, etc.

Wearing a clean apron protects food from microbes on clothing. After preparing meat, poultry or fish, wash hands, knives and cutting boards thoroughly.

» Thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator in a container on the lowest shelf to avoid dripping on other foods. Microwave thawing can be safe as long as

the food is thoroughly cooked soon after thawing.

» Cook meats, poultry and fish thoroughly -- especially if purchased in a ground form. Use a meat thermometer.

» When transporting, holding and serving foods, keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Perishable foods should be left at room temperature no more than two hours. Hot foods should be kept at more than 140 degrees and covered. Containers can be held in insulated containers -- even wrapping them tightly in newspaper can help keep them hot for a while. Keep a bowl of cold food cold by placing it on top of a larger bowl full of ice or freezer cold packs.

» Minimize picnic items such as meats that will likely become unsafe. Provide more fruit and vegetable finger foods. And, "When in doubt, throw it out."

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