

# Food illness heats up

Sizzling days of summer raise risk of food poisoning

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Lisa Hutkowski of St. Clair eases a New York Strip steak onto her grill. She is meticulous about making sure the food she serves is safe, using a thermometer to ensure meat is cooked thoroughly. / Times Herald photos by MELISSA WAWZYSKO



Lisa Hutkowski of St. Clair touches a cantaloupe melon that is in her kitchen sink ready to be washed along with a cucumber, green bell pepper and a container of sweet grape tomatoes.

Lisa Hutkowski lets water stream over a cantaloupe melon.



Lisa Hutkowski of St. Clair uses soap to wash her hands, fruit and vegetables while preparing dinner.

It's the dog days of summer, but it might as well be the middle of winter.

You feel achy, your head hurts and your nauseous stomach won't stop churning.

It could be the flu, but chances are good you may be suffering from a mild form of food poisoning.

With outdoor temperatures and potluck gatherings on the rise during summer, it's more important than ever to protect your food dishes from sickening bacteria, said Ruth Habalewsky, food program coordinator with the St. Clair County Health Department.

Hand washing is the first place to start, she said.

"That's the No. 1 thing you can do is wash your hands," Habalewsky said. "If you think about all the different surfaces you touch with your hands --the counter, the telephone, the cupboard door handle -- the viruses can live for days. The bacteria doesn't, but the viruses can.

"There's hundreds of kinds of food-borne illness," she said.

"Some can make you really sick, especially if your immune system is compromised. That's where it can cause problems.

Habalewsky said there is an array of different actions you can take to ensure your food is safe to eat.

"A lot of it is common sense," she said. "When in doubt, throw it out."

### **Clean everything**

Habalewsky said buying an inexpensive thermometer for your refrigerator is a great place to start to make sure your cold foods stay cold.

"You want to make sure your refrigerator is working right," she said. "Sometimes with high humidity, you can have problems.

You want to keep the food in your refrigerator at 40 degrees. If it's opened frequently --like if you have a lot of kids -- you want to keep it about 38 degrees."

Washing your hands should be done several times before, during and after food preparation, Habalewsky said. Wash with hot, soapy water for at least 20 seconds before handling food and after handling raw meats or poultry, using the bathroom, touching pets or changing diapers.

Any type of cutting board will serve the purpose as long as it's thoroughly cleaned such as washing it in a sanitizing dishwasher, she said. An antibacterial spray such as Fantastic can be sprayed on cutting boards and countertops and should be left to air dry without wiping. Using a mixture of one part bleach to 10 parts of water will do the trick as well, but avoid stainless steel to prevent white streaks.

"What you want to make sure of is that the cutting board is cleaned between uses, especially if you're cutting raw meat," Habalewsky said. "A lot of restaurants and people I've met, too, use different cutting boards for vegetables and meats."

Habalewsky said the dishwasher needs to be operating at a high water temperature. Chlorinated dishwashing soap also is helpful. "It's kind of tricky," she said. "I've talked with the Maytag dealer, and those sanitizers on the dishwashers will work, but the temperature has to be set at the highest setting."

Replacing dish rags and sponges often can cut down on bacteria as well.

"They don't last very long," Habalewsky said. "Think about room temperature, and that's when the viruses and bacteria multiply.

When you're wiping the sponge on this and on that, you're recontaminating."

Even sinks and garbage disposals can harbor germs, but vinegar or bleach will wipe out the pathogens.

Don't forget fresh fruits and vegetables should be washed in clean water before consumption, too, especially melons. Once cut, the melon should be put on ice to slow down the potential bacteria growth.

"It's very important to wash the melon and scrub it with a brush," she said. "When you cut into the melon, the knife goes right through it. If there's any bacteria on the knife, it will go all the way through the melon. By washing it and rinsing it with water, it will take the dirt away from the melon."

### **Same rules apply for grilling**

Lisa Hutkowski of St. Clair takes advantage of the summer months to grill outside more often with her son, Kevin, 13, but she's careful to observe the same rules that apply in the kitchen. Before placing her rib-eye steaks on the grill recently, she diligently scrubbed a cantaloupe with a stiff brush and washed up a cucumber with regular dishwashing liquid before generously rinsing with water.

"I figure it's safe for your dishes, and you eat off your dishes," she said.

Hutkowski also is careful not to cross-contaminate the raw meats with cooked foods by replacing any dishware or utensils that may have come in contact with raw juices.

"Whatever plate and tongs I bring out, I put the meat on for 4 or 5 minutes, I flip it and then come back with a clean plate and tongs," she said.

She also heats her grill to the highest temperature so she's sure the steaks are thoroughly cooked.

"You want to make sure your grill is hot enough," Hutkowski said.

"I always make sure the grill is really hot before I put the meat on, and I always cook it at a high temperature, especially ground beef."

Habalewsky also does not use marinade for the raw meat on cooked foods. She also marinades meat in the refrigerator, not on counters or outdoors to ensure against bacterial growth.

Habalewsky said metal-stemmed thermometers, available now in digital instant-read varieties, are not only good for roasts but great for making sure smaller cuts of meat, poultry or fish are thoroughly cooked. She said although it may look done by appearance, smell or taste, the food could contain dangerous bacteria.

"Even though you've made the same recipe for years and years, you want to make sure that it's cooked the same," she said. "You may have bought a thicker piece of meat. You need to take the temperature of the food, because you might have assumed you bought a 6-ounce chicken breast when really it's 8 ounces. You need to take the temperature of the food if you're not sure."

## **Play it cool on the road**

Summertime is the best for enjoying the warm weather and eating outdoors, but your food needs to keep its cool, said Carol

Bublitz, nutrition instructor with St. Clair County's Michigan State University Extension office.

"Most bacteria doesn't grow rapidly over 40 degrees, and 32 degrees is freezing," she said. "So you want your food to be between those two temperatures, especially if you have a little mayonnaise on your sandwich.

She suggested packing the cooler with the meat and poultry at the bottom to prevent raw juices from dripping onto other foods. Then stock the items you will use last, followed by those you will use first.

Bublitz also recommended having a separate cooler for beverages. That allows the food cooler to stay colder, since the drink cooler will be opened more frequently. Hot foods that remain above 140 degrees in a crock pot or other heated container can be eaten anytime.

Block ice is better than cubed ice, since it melts more slowly, Bublitz said. Freezer packs also are a great option in coolers to prevent the watery mess. She said any additional space left in the cooler should be filled with ice.

A good rule of thumb for any food, she said, is anything not kept at the proper temperature for more than two hours should be discarded.

"Something to help people with it is the old adage about keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold," Bublitz said.

"We (the MSU Extension) still use that today."

**Cathy Barringer Rourke is a freelance writer who lives in St. Clair.**