

Ebel: Don't let foodborne illness ruin your holidays

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

Sharing a meal with family and friends is an important part of celebrating this time of year. Unfortunately, a foodborne illness can ruin your holidays faster than getting a lump of coal in your stocking.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that each year 48 million (1 in 6) people in the United States get sick from a foodborne illness. Of those, 128,000 require hospitalization and 3,000 die. Foods can become contaminated with bacteria, viruses, parasites, or toxins during production, transportation, preparation, or service.

The recent outbreak of E. coli linked to romaine lettuce is an example of a food becoming contaminated during production. Raw meats are often contaminated during processing, but thorough cooking usually destroys those germs. Because lettuce is eaten raw, and simple rinsing of the lettuce is not an adequate way to remove all the contaminants, the CDC advised discarding any romaine lettuce.

It is much more common that food becomes contaminated during preparation. This includes food prepared at home and in restaurants.

The most common foodborne disease, Norovirus, and many other diseases can be spread when food handlers who are sick continue to work or when food handlers do not thoroughly wash their hands after using the bathroom.

Germs can also be spread through cross-contamination, such as using a cutting board to cut raw chicken and then using the same cutting board or knife to cut up tomatoes for a salad or another food that will not be cooked to a high temperature. This can also happen when the person cooking the food handles raw meat like hamburger and then touches other items like the bun without washing their hands thoroughly in between.

Undercooking food can also lead to a foodborne illness. Always assume that raw meats are contaminated with some level of harmful germs. That is why cooking meat to the appropriate temperature is needed to destroy the bacteria that are most common in that food. These include 145°F for whole cuts of beef, pork, veal, and lamb, 160°F for ground meats, such as beef and pork, 165°F for all poultry, including eggs, chicken and turkey, 165°F for leftovers and casseroles, 145°F for fresh ham (raw), and 145°F for fin fish or cook until flesh is opaque.

Finally, refrigerating food properly can reduce the growth of harmful bacteria. Make sure that your refrigerator is at 40°F or below, refrigerate perishable foods within two hours (get those leftovers off the counter and into the fridge!), and thaw frozen food safely in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave. Never thaw foods on the counter, because bacteria multiply quickly in the parts of the food that reach room temperature.

The food protection team made of environmental health sanitarians at the Licking County Health Department regularly inspect our local food service establishments and provide training for food handlers and managers, but for home cooks who are not used to serving large holiday meals, avoiding food handling errors can be a challenge.

If you follow the simple guidance of Clean: Wash your hands and surfaces often, Separate: Don't cross-contaminate, Cook: To the right temperature, and Chill: Refrigerate promptly, we can all have a safer, and happier, holiday season.

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