

Tailgating Time Again: Don't Forget Food Safety

Are you ready for some football? Football season is here, and that means thousands of Alabamians will be tailgating before and after games.

Although tailgating traditions vary among schools and regions, they all include food. The heat in the Southeast sometimes dictates the food selections for tailgating. During the early part of football season, while temperatures are still quite warm, grilled hot dogs and hamburgers are always a favorite, as are fried chicken, potato salad and baked beans served with your favorite cold beverage.

As temperatures cool down, soups, chili and stews gain more attention, along with hot chocolate and coffee. No matter what the food, safety should always be a priority, says Dr. Jean Weese, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System food scientist. Keep up with how long perishable food is left out. Perishable foods should not be above 40 degrees F for more than **two hours**.

"Sometimes people think just because food has been cooked, it cannot spoil," says Weese. Bacteria can grow in foods both before and after the cooking process. Foodborne illness is always a possibility when the food's temperature is between 40 degrees F and 140 degrees F for more than two hours.

About seven million Americans suffer from food poisoning each year. About 85 percent of those cases could be avoided with proper handling.

Preparing food at home can save time and work at the tailgating site, but some last-minute mixing can improve food safety. Meats can be partially precooked, then quickly refrigerated, transported in an ice chest and cooked completely on a grill at the tailgate site. Some foods, such as chicken or sausage, can be boiled for a short time (five to eight minutes).

Improper handling of cooking utensils can also encourage foodborne illness. For example, cutting raw meat with a knife and then using the same knife to cut lettuce or fresh vegetables without thoroughly washing the knife poses a cross contamination risk. Bacteria from the meat is transferred to the vegetables by the knife.

The transfer of bacteria also occurs when the same unwashed plate or platter is used to carry meat back and forth to the grill. Bacteria is transferred to the cooked meat as it is placed on that plate and brought to the table. Other tools of contamination can be the countertop, the cutting board, the sink or hand towels.

To avoid cross-contamination, always clean utensils and hands with hot, soapy water. Two teaspoons of unscented bleach mixed with a gallon of rinse water adds extra assurance of sterilization of utensils. Scrub hands together with soap for 20 seconds instead of just swiping them under running water. Clean between the fingers and under the nails.

Cooking foods to the proper temperature is another way to ensure safety. Don't judge the doneness of meat by its color. Beef cooked to a grayish shade does not mean the middle has reached 155 degrees F, which is the recommended temperature for ground meat. Poultry needs to reach 165 degrees F to be thoroughly cooked.

Coolers also play an important role in combating foodborne illness. Juices from the uncooked meats stored in a cooler should not touch other foods. Keep coolers tightly closed and do not open unless necessary. The temperature is more likely to change the more it is opened. Keep all cold foods below 40 degrees F. As time passes, replenish the melted ice in the cooler. Pour out standing water.

Some foodborne illnesses take four hours to 50 days before you get sick. It is not a pleasant experience and, with just a few simple precautions, can be avoided. Good tailgaters clean up properly after they have eaten. They place all paper, cans, bottles, discarded food and any other trash in a large trash bag and close it tightly. Then place the trash bag in a dumpster before leaving the tailgating site.

Remember to have fun, support your favorite team and keep food safe. For any food safety/preservation/preparation questions please contact your local County Extension Office or call Angela Treadaway your Regional Extension Agent in Food Safety/Preservation/Preparation at 205-410-3696.