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News Release

Fall is the Season for Foodborne Illness

The changing season brings about many activities involving food. Church reunions and tailgating are especially risky because many times there are large amounts of food and it is difficult to maintain proper temperatures during these events. Fall is also the time when the little ones start back to school. Packing school lunches for small children is especially important since their immune systems are not fully developed and they are more at risk to food poisoning than adults.

Whether you are packing school lunches or cooking for a crowd of 200, remembering these four simple steps will help you keep food safe for those you care about.

First, make sure everything that touches food is CLEAN. Make sure cutting boards, utensils, and other food contact surfaces are clean and sanitary before you begin food preparation. Most importantly, wash hands before beginning food preparation and periodically during food preparation. As a general guideline, wash your hands anytime you change tasks during food preparation – that will cut down on the spread of bacteria from food to food.

Second, keep raw meats, poultry, and seafood SEPARATE from foods that will not be cooked like lettuce and fruit. Also, make sure that you store raw meats on the bottom of the refrigerator so that juices do not drip onto foods that are ready to eat. If you are packing raw meats in a cooler, consider taking two coolers – one for raw meats and one for foods that will not be cooked before eating.

Third, COOK meat, poultry, and seafood to minimum safe temperatures. Poultry should be cooked to at least 165 degrees, hamburger 160 degrees, steak 145 degrees, and fish 145 degrees. Measuring the temperature with a food thermometer is the easiest way to make sure food is cooked to an adequate temperature without overcooking.

Finally, be sure to CHILL food that is meant to be kept cold. This includes foods like potato salad and lunch meat, as well as, leftover hot foods that will be chilled and then eaten the next day. Cold food should be kept 40 degrees or below to prevent bacterial growth. Leaving food out at room temperature for as little as two hours (less on a hot day) is enough time for bacteria to grow. If you are packing cold foods, such as potato salad, for travel or for school, make sure that you thoroughly chill the food before putting it in a cooler or lunch box and include ice or an icepack to keep it chilled for hours at a time.

The St. Clair County Extension office is here to help with any food safety questions you may have. If your church, school, or community organization is interested in attending a class to find out more about how to keep food safe, please give me a call at (205) 338-9416 or email treadas@aces.edu. Remember: WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!