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Food Safety: Preventing Food Poisoning

I hope this New Year of 2007 finds you healthy, happy and feeling fantastic! The second of two articles on food poisoning reports why not everyone gets sick from eating an implicated food, what we do affects our food safety, and what you can do to lessen chances for becoming ill. First, is a short quiz to get you thinking about what you do in the kitchen! Answers are at the end of article.

1. Temperature of refrigerator in my home is (a) 50 degrees Fahrenheit; (b) 41 F; (c) I don't know; I've never measured it.
2. Last time you had leftover cooked stew or other food with meat/chicken/fish, food was (a) cooled to room temperature, then put in refrigerator; (b) put in refrigerator immediately after food was served; (c) left at room temperature overnight or longer.
3. Last time the kitchen sink drain, disposal and connecting pipe were sanitized was (a) last night; (b) several weeks ago; (c) can't remember.
4. If cutting board used to cut raw meat, poultry or fish is used to chop another food, the board (a) is reused as is; (b) wiped with a damp cloth; (c) washed with soap and hot water and sanitized with a mild chlorine bleach solution.
5. Last time we had hamburgers in my home, I ate mine (a) rare; (b) medium; (c) well-done.
6. Last time there was cookie dough in my home, the dough was (a) made with raw eggs; I sampled some; (b) store-bought; I sampled some of it; (c) not sampled until baked.
7. Last time I handled raw meat, poultry or fish, I cleaned my hands afterwards by (a) wiping them on a towel; (b) rinsing them under hot, cold, or warm water; (c) washing them with soap and warm water.
8. Meat, poultry, and fish products are defrosted in my home by (a) setting them on the counter; (b) placing them in the refrigerator; (c) microwaving.

Why everyone does not get sick from eating implicated food: food may not be contaminated throughout, host (i.e., you) susceptibility varies (infants, young children, older adults, and immune-compromised persons are most vulnerable); dosage (quantity consumed) varies; reporting errors through faulty recall; and those reporting illness (but no exposure to incriminated food) may have a coincidental, unrelated illness.

What We Do Affects Our Food. The way we heat, refrigerate, or handle food may have an effect on foodborne illness. Here is a summary of known factors that contribute to foodborne illness outbreaks:

- failing to refrigerate potentially hazardous foods
- allowing food to remain warm (at bacterial incubation temperatures)
- preparing foods several hours or days before intended use or using leftovers (with inadequate storage after preparation)
- failing to thoroughly cool or heat process contaminated food (e.g., hamburger)
- using a contaminated raw ingredient in a food that is to be served uncooked (e.g., contaminated eggs in Caesar salad dressing)
- bringing contaminated raw foods containing organisms into kitchen and cross contaminating cooked foods (e.g., using cutting board to prepare contaminated raw food and then using same board or equipment to cook food)
- obtaining food supplies from unsafe sources (e.g., buying raw milk or cheese made from raw milk)
- failing to clean and disinfect kitchen utensils and equipment
- using utensils and serve-ware that contain toxic chemicals
- using poor dry storage practices (e.g., allowing moisture to get into storage containers of grains)
- using incompletely cooked eggs in a pudding held at room temperature before serving (would enable salmonella organism to grow at a higher concentration)
- not washing hands before and after preparing foods preparing food and after using toilet facilities

Answers to quiz: 1 b); 2 b); 3 a); 4 c); 5 c); 6 b and c); 7 (c); 8 b and c)

For information about federal governmental regulations relating to foods, Google the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) which is responsible for ensuring safety and wholesomeness of all foods sold interstate except for meat, poultry, and eggs and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) which regulates meat, poultry, and eggs. The FDA issued advice to consumers (Nov 2006) to reduce risk of foodborne illness from fresh produce. Check <http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2006/NEW01503.htm>. In addition, hints for egg safety: <http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2006/NEW01535.html>