

An Ounce of Prevention: Keeps the Germs Away

September is National Food Safety Month and an excellent time to learn four major tips for preventing contamination of foods.

Almost everyone has experienced a foodborne illness at some point in time. But do we only get sick from restaurant food? No, in fact many cases of foodborne illnesses occur when food is prepared at home. If food is handled and prepared safely, most of those can be avoided. All food may contain some natural bacteria, and improper handling gives the bacteria a chance to grow. Also, food can be contaminated with bacteria from other sources that can make you ill. Contaminated or unclean food can be very dangerous, especially to children and the elderly. Each year foodborne illnesses kill up to 9,000 people. They also cause fever, stomach cramps, vomiting, and diarrhea in almost 80 million Americans.

1. **Use caution when you buy your food.**
 - Buy perishable food such as meat, eggs, and milk last.
 - Because eggs, meat, seafood, and poultry are most likely to contain bacteria, do not allow their juices to drip on other food.
2. **Store your food properly.**
 - Store eggs, raw meat, poultry, and seafood in the refrigerator.
 - Your refrigerator should be set at 40° F.
 - Your freezer should be set at 0° F.
3. **Use special precautions when preparing and cooking food.**
 - Wash your hands and clean and disinfect kitchen surfaces before, during and after handling, cooking, and serving food.
 - Use different dishes and utensils for raw foods than you use for cooked foods.
4. **Cool and promptly store leftovers after food has been served.**
 - Do not leave perishable foods out for more than two hours.
 - Promptly refrigerate or freeze leftovers in shallow containers or wrapped tightly in bags.

Basically use common sense and when in doubt, throw it out. It is much cheaper to throw out bad food than it is to pay expensive medical bills or miss work.