

Food safety comes first

A few things to keep in mind during your summer barbecue to avoid getting sick

By KATE GENELLIE
The Herald-Palladium

ST. JOSEPH — Sun, sand and cook-outs — is there anything more essential to a Southwest Michigan summer?

But when your friends and family come over for a barbecue, some uninvited guests could show up, too. They're microscopic, and, if you let them stick around, they'll wear out their welcome quickly.

Their names are salmonella, listeria monocytogenes, E. coli and norovirus — among others.

One in six Americans get sick from them each year, and food poisoning sends more than 100,000 Americans to the hospital, according to www.foodsafety.gov.

Foodborne illnesses are contracted when food isn't prepared properly and can cause nausea, cramps, diarrhea and vomiting.



WOODRUFF

Chris Woodruff, who runs the hospitality program and teaches food safety courses at Lake Michigan College, said the same rules he goes over with his students will help home cooks keep their food safe as well.

Woodruff said home cooks don't have to know much about the bacteria and viruses.

"The great thing is, you don't have to know them or how to spell them," Woodruff said. "I just tell (my students), 'Know how to prevent them.'"

Woodruff teaches classes of about 60 hospitality and culinary students per year. He also certifies between 150 and 200 industry workers in ServSafe, a national program developed by the National Restaurant Association. Michigan requires that most restaurants employ at least one food manager accredited by the ServSafe program.

Woodruff's students start with considering the flow of food, he said. He wants his students to think of all the ways food



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When attending an outdoor barbecue this summer, be conscious of how long food has been exposed to the elements to avoid foodborne illness.

preparation could wrong, starting before the food gets to their kitchen. He wants them to consider the suppliers. Are they trustworthy? Do they use safe food practices?

"Even before they get the food, they could make a bad decision" by purchas-

ing food from suspect suppliers, Woodruff said.

The most important factors to consider, he said, are food temperatures, cross contamination and hand hygiene.

"Hand washing is the single easiest thing that, if people would do it, would

prevent foodborne illness," Woodruff said.

Cross contamination is another issue, he said. A home cook may take a plate of raw hamburgers outside to the grill

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and then put the grilled hamburgers on that same plate, still covered in raw hamburger juice.

Food safety steps

Gillian Conrad, the communications and administrative services manager for the Berrien County Health Department, said the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends four general steps of food safety:

- Clean (your hands, cutting boards, utensils)
- Separate (avoid contact between certain foods, such as raw meat and vegetables)
- Cook (heat foods to proper temperature using a food thermometer)
- Chill (raw food should be properly stored, and cooked leftovers should be cooled and then refrigerated)

Extensive information on food safety tips, broken down by type of food as well as by events and seasons, can be found online at www.foodsafety.gov.



CONRAD

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GILLIAN CONRAD
Berrien County Health Department

The health department conducts all restaurant inspections in Berrien County. Michigan mandates twice yearly visits for all year-round restaurants, as well as seasonal visits for festivals and food trucks – so summer weekends are very busy at the BCHD.

Deb Clement, a food sanitarian and team leader of the BCHD environmental health department, said she looks for the same issues during her inspections that home cooks should watch out for: clean preparation spaces, employees washing their hands and food stored at the proper temperature.

For events like barbecues and outdoor potlucks, Clement recommends being watchful of how long certain dishes have been sitting out.

“A food like potato salad is what I call potentially hazardous – it’s animal, or dairy, based,” Clement said, adding it shouldn’t be left outside longer than two hours.

Foodborne illness

Conrad said foodborne illness would be her biggest concern, even more so than insects.

“I would be less concerned with eating a bug than with foodborne illness,” Conrad said. “It’s nasty.”

Norovirus, a highly contagious virus and the leading cause of foodborne illness in the U.S. according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is often what people are talking about when they say they have a stomach flu or a “24-hour bug,” Conrad said.

According to the CDC, norovirus can cause stomach and intestine inflammation, resulting in diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. People with norovirus usually recover in one to three days.

“It can be pretty swift, but it’s hellish,” Conrad said.

Norovirus is usually the culprit during foodborne illness outbreaks in places such as cruise ships, because it

can contaminate not just food, but surfaces as well, Conrad said.

If a person with norovirus attends a potluck or luncheon and touches the serving utensils, then everyone down the line could contract the virus.

“I think everyone could wash their hands a little bit more,” Conrad said.

“That’s my number one thing,” Clement agreed.

Conrad said another food-related concern in the summer is power outages. If the power goes out in your home, food will stay cold in your refrigerator for a while as long as you keep the door closed. But once the air temperature inside the fridge rises to room temperature, there’s about a two-hour window before the food needs to be thrown out.

Clement said many people are becoming better informed about food safety, improving their own health and making the jobs of everyone at the BCHD a little easier.