



NEWS RELEASE

St. Charles County Government

Department of Governmental Communications

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Foodborne Illness

Simple ways to keep yourself and your family healthy

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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St. Charles County – "It must have been something I ate," is often the explanation for what many people call the "stomach flu". Health officials however, have a different name for this problem. They call it foodborne illness and estimate that each year 76 million cases of it strike people in the United States. But you don't have to be one of the unlucky ones. Most cases of foodborne illness can be prevented through some simple food handling and storage steps. All it takes is a little know-how and everyday weapons as soap and water, a refrigerator and a food thermometer to check the temperature.

What is a Foodborne Illness?

Foodborne illness is the sickness that results from eating foods that are contaminated with harmful bacteria and other microorganisms. Although you may not see, smell or taste these "bugs", under the right conditions, they may be present on the foods when they are purchased or get into food during preparation, cooking, serving or storage. Common symptoms of foodborne illness include diarrhea, abdominal cramps, fever, headache and vomiting. These symptoms may come on as early as a half hour after eating contaminated food or may not develop for up to two weeks. They usually last only a day or two, but in some cases can persist a week or more. For most healthy people, foodborne illnesses are neither long-lasting nor life-threatening. However, the consequences can be severe and may require hospitalization and even lead to death in the very young, the very old and those with weakened immune systems.



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How to Keep Foods Safe

Because bacteria can survive on raw foods despite aggressive controls at the processing and retail levels, food safety experts urge consumers to think about food safety at each step in the food handling process - from shopping or bringing takeout foods home to storing leftovers. This means consumers should always follow these four simple steps:

Clean -- Wash hands, utensils and surfaces with hot soapy water before and after food preparation, and especially after preparing meat, poultry, eggs or seafood to protect adequately against bacteria. Using a disinfectant cleaner or a mixture of bleach and water on surfaces and antibacterial soap on hands can provide some added protection.

Separate -- Keep raw meat, poultry, eggs and seafood and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods; never place cooked food on an unwashed plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, eggs or seafood.

Cook -- Cook food to the proper internal temperatures (this varies for different cuts and types of meat and poultry) and check for doneness with a food thermometer. Cook eggs until both the yolk and white are firm.

Chill -- Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared food and leftovers within two hours and make sure the refrigerator is set at no higher than 40°F and that the freezer unit is set at 0°F. To properly clean fresh fruits and vegetables, rinse them under running tap water, including those with skins and rinds that are not eaten. Rub firm-skin fruits and vegetables under running tap water or scrub with a clean cloth towel or paper towel. Never use detergent or bleach to wash fresh fruits or vegetables. Bleach and other cleansers are not intended for consumption.



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Quick Tips to Packing a Safe School Lunch

Always keep it clean. Wash your hands in with warm water and soap, and use hot, soapy water to make sure food-preparation surfaces and utensils are clean. Teach your children to wash their hands with warm water and soap before they eat.

Be sure to keep hot foods such as soup, chili or stew hot by using an insulated bottle. Fill the bottle with boiling water and let it stand for a few minutes. Empty the bottle and then fill it with piping hot food. Keep the bottle closed until lunchtime.

Insulated, soft-sided lunch totes are best for keeping perishable food cold, but metal or plastic lunch boxes and paper bags can also be used. If using paper lunch bags, create layers by double bagging to help insulate the food. A cold source, such as a small frozen gel pack or frozen juice box, should be packed with perishable food in any type of lunch bag or box. After lunch, discard all used food packaging and paper bags. Do not reuse paper or plastic bags. Freezer gel packs will keep foods cold until lunchtime, but are not recommended for all-day storage.

Try freezing single-sized juice packs overnight and placing the frozen drink in your child's lunch. If your child's lunchtime is late enough, the juice will thaw by lunchtime, but it will still be cold. The frozen drink will also keep the rest of the lunch cold.

Tell your child to use the refrigerator at school, if one is available. If not, make sure he or she keeps the lunch out of direct sunlight and away from radiators, baseboards and other heat sources found in the classroom. Any perishable food (such as meat, poultry, egg sandwiches, fresh-cut fruits and vegetables) not eaten at lunch should be thrown away. If you make sandwiches the night before, keep them in the refrigerator until packing up to go in the morning.

For more information on forborne illnesses and safe food handling, visit the Partnership for Food Safety Education website at www.fightbac.org For more information about the St. Charles County Department of Community Health and the Environment visit www.scchealth.org