

SUMMER FOOD SAFETY TIPS

Each year about 200, 000 New Zealanders become sick with foodborne illness, with almost half these cases due to mishandling food in the home.

Summer, in particular, is a time when many of these illnesses surface as temperatures soar and food preparation shifts from the kitchen to backyard barbeques and picnic areas.

Canterbury District Health Board Health Protection Officers Sue McEwan and Debbie Smith look at how to enjoy al fresco dining without the risk of illness.

What is meant by foodborne illness?

A foodborne illness is more commonly known as food poisoning. Bacteria such as campylobacter, salmonella or *E.coli* and many others multiply faster on food in moist, warm conditions and may lead to symptoms such as diarrhoea, vomiting and stomach cramps. Although Norovirus is often spread from person to person, if someone is ill with it or has no symptoms but is shedding the virus while preparing food, the illness can also spread to others when they eat the food. For the young, elderly or those with low immunity, the consequences of foodborne illness can be very serious.

So how can I protect myself and my family from these illnesses?

The four Cs – clean, cook, cover and chill – are among the most effective ways to ensure you keep your food safe and you and your family healthy.

Wash and dry hands thoroughly (wash and dry for 20 seconds each) or use an alcohol gel before handling food, after handling raw meat and poultry, going to the toilet, handling pets and gardening. Use a clean set of utensils and plates for raw food and another for cooked meats. All chopping boards and utensils should be scrubbed with hot soapy water after they have been in contact with raw meat.

Defrost meats thoroughly before cooking them and, if you're cooking on the barbeque, make sure burgers, sausages, pork and poultry are cooked until the juices run clear and they are not pink in the middle. Eat food as soon as possible after it is cooked and only re-heat it once.

Cover all food before storing in the fridge or cupboard and, if you're eating outside, keep food covered and, if necessary, in the fridge, until you're ready to eat it.

It's a good idea to throw out any food that can go off once it's been left at room temperature for more than two hours.

All leftovers should be refrigerated or put in a chilly bin and take food to a picnic or barbeque in a chilly bin with icepacks.

All my extended family are coming over on Christmas Day. How can I avoid giving them an unexpected Christmas present?

Storing food when fridge space is at a premium can be a challenge. Try relegating drinks to a chilly bin or bath loaded with ice or put all vegetables and fruit that don't need to be stored in the fridge in a cool, dry place.

Take the turkey out of the freezer four days before Christmas Day and defrost in the bottom of the fridge below ready to eat foods. Cook the turkey until the juices are running clear and there is no pink flesh with a skewer. Salads with creamy dressings should be stored in the fridge or wait until they are served before putting the dressing on. The same goes for desserts containing cream; put it on just before serving.

And if you're worried about how to store any leftovers, ask visitors to take some home with them!

How do I look after the Christmas ham?

Once it is opened, a whole cooked ham should last one to two weeks. Pieces that are sliced off should last three to five days.

Keep the ham covered with a clean damp tea towel or a ham bag and change it daily. For extra freshness, wet the towel or ham bag with a dilute vinegar solution. If you don't think you'll be able to eat all the ham in this time, freeze some of it in clean freezer bags. Make sure to always handle ham with clean hands, clean knives and on a clean board.

What advice have you got for campers this summer?

Fully serviced camping grounds should have freezers or fridge space you can use so pack food with icepacks for travelling and use local shops to restock perishable items when needed. Camping in an area with no facilities requires careful planning.

- Plan your meals in advance around foods that travel and store easily.
- Use canned and freeze dried food where possible.
- Freeze meat in meal size portions. Layer with icepacks in the chilly bin.
- Leave the poultry or fish at home.

In an area with no kitchen facilities avoid drinking from streams, lakes or other untreated water sources. Take clean water or large water containers to sterilise water in. Use for washing fruit and vegetables, washing hands and teeth cleaning.

What should I do if I think I've got a foodborne illness?

If you think you may have food poisoning after attending a function or eating in a food premises, seek advice from your General Practice.

Anyone with vomiting or diarrhoea should stay away from public places until 48 hours after their symptoms have subsided.