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Food Borne Illnesses Peak in Summer, Warns Health Department

BREWSTER, NY—Spoiled food can make a person sick any day of the year. But warm weather and picnic meals make the problem more common.

“The number of cases of food-related illnesses rise during the summer for two reasons,” says interim Health Commissioner Michael J. Nesheiwat, M.D. “The first is that bacteria grow more quickly in warm and humid settings. The second reason is that preparing food and eating outdoors makes it harder to follow simple food safety rules. Some of the more common culprits that cause food borne illnesses include E. coli, salmonella and campylobacter, resulting in a variety of gastrointestinal symptoms, ranging from mild to severe.”

Four basic steps for food safety are endorsed by the Putnam County Department of Health, along with other experts including the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service. In plain terms remember this: C-S-C-C for clean, separate, cook and chill.

Unwashed and unclean hands spread germs and can cause illness. Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds with warm soapy water before eating or preparing food. If you are away from home, bring clean, wet disposable washcloths, moist towelettes and paper towels for cleaning hands and surfaces. Clean all fruits and vegetables before use—especially if you eat it raw, without cooking it.

Separate raw and cooked food to avoid contamination when preparing, grilling and serving food. This a main cause of food borne illness. Be careful to avoid cross contamination when packing a cooler as well.

Cook all meat to a safe temperature and take your thermometer along to test it. Beef, lamb and veal (steaks, roasts and chops) should be cooked to 145 degree F, pork to 150 degrees F, chicken to 165 degrees F, and ground meats to 160 degrees F. Fish should be cooked to 140 degrees F. Do not rely on the color of the food or juices. Use the thermometer.

Chill is the final step. All cooked food and luncheon meats, or potato and pasta salads, as well as left overs, should be kept refrigerated. Insulated coolers need to be packed with several inches of ice, ice packs or containers of frozen water on top to keep food safe. Food left out without refrigeration for more than two hours may not be safe to eat. When the weather is warm and temperatures are above 90 degrees F, food should not be left out for more than one hour. Remember, if in doubt—throw it out.

Other important summer food safety tips:

- If food won't be eaten for two hours or more, keep hot food at 140 degrees F or higher and cold foods at 40 degrees F or lower.
- A wide shallow container allows cooked food to cool more rapidly. Refrigerate leftovers promptly to limit the growth of germs. When reheating make sure the food reaches 165 degrees F.
- Cook from frozen or defrost in the refrigerator or cooler. Never thaw frozen foods a room temperature.
- When shopping, select frozen and refrigerated items last. Place back in refrigerator or freezer as soon as possible.

The Department of Health's mission is to improve and protect the health of the Putnam County community, composed of nearly 100,000 residents. Core services include community health assessment, disease surveillance and control, emergency preparedness, environmental health protection, family health promotion and health education. For more information, please visit the PCDOH website at www.putnamcountyny.com/health or visit the social media sites on Facebook at www.facebook.com/putnamhealth, and Twitter @PutnamHealthNY.

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