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# Underrating Food Safety

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Do American consumers - male and female - underrate their individual responsibility for keeping food safe in the home?

A survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS) indicates that they may.

For instance, the survey disclosed that many consumers are unaware that absolute protection is not "guaranteed" simply because meat and poultry products are inspected in processing plants by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). Also the survey revealed that consumers this time of year are taking unnecessary risks in the handling of turkey and stuffing.

Sixty three percent of those who responded to the special food safety survey conducted in June and July thought it was "not likely" or "not at all likely" for meat and poultry to carry harmful bacteria and germs.

Although Congress charged APHIS in the 1967-68 Wholesome Meat and Poultry Inspection Acts with

the responsibility of inspecting the nation's meat and poultry supply to assure its wholesomeness, this inspection does not extend to retail stores, nor does it relieve consumers of the responsibility to take proper food safety precautions in the home.

The survey showed the consumer is not aware that he - or she - must take these precautions to keep food safe by avoiding the growth of bacteria.

APHIS meat inspection officials stress to consumers that meat and poultry are not sterile products, and if abused can cause food poisoning. The survey indicates this fact is not understood by everyone.

Statistics on illnesses caused by food poisoning have shown that a high percentage are the result of improper food handling in the home or food service establishments.

The ERS survey disclosed that consumers also do not understand the danger involved in allowing cooked food to stand at room temperature for more than two

or three hours.

Eighty-eight percent of those queried said they were concerned - from a food safety standpoint - about letting uncooked meat or poultry stand for more than two or three hours at room temperature. However, only 53 percent were concerned about leaving cooked food out for the same period of time.

Most food bacteria in uncooked food are destroyed at cooking temperatures above 140 degrees F., but food scientists point out that cooked food also can be a haven for growing bacteria through re-contamination or cross-contamination.

Asked which of three alternative ways they would go about preparing a hypothetical meal to avoid cross contamination, more than half-59 percent of the consumers-chose the two wrong answers.

The three methods of preparation listed were:

- "After cutting up the fresh meat, I would chop the fresh vegetables and then wash the knife, the cutting board, and my hand with soap and water.

- "After cutting up the fresh meat, I would rinse off the knife, the cutting board, and my hands and then chop the fresh vegetables.

- "After cutting up the fresh meat, I would wash the knife, the cutting board, and my hands with soap and hot water and then chop the fresh vegetables."

The last method is correct. In the other two methods, a consumer could cross-contaminate fresh vegetables which may result in food poisoning of a family.

The rule is to wash all utensils and hands in hot soapy water after handling raw food - since it may bear

bacteria - and before touching cooked food. Cooking food at proper temperatures will destroy bacteria which cause food poisoning - i.e., staph, perfringens and salmonella.

**Turkey and Stuffing**  
The survey is particularly significant as the holiday season nears. Survey results revealed many consumers are taking unnecessary risks in handling turkey and stuffing.

A majority of consumers believe that when "turkey is done" the stuffing is done."

Food scientists warn that stuffing - which is usually tightly packed into the interior cavity of a turkey - should be cooked to at least a 165 degrees F. temperature. Furthermore, as it is the last part of the turkey to reach maximum heat, a meat thermometer should be used in the middle of the stuffing to determine when it reaches that temperature.

Consumers did understand that stuffing a turkey in advance - the night before cooking - is not wise. It allows time for salmonella and other bacteria to multiply in the stuffing.

Likewise, 26 percent of the consumers knew it is safest to cook turkey and stuffing separately.

Copies of the preliminary report of the survey may be obtained by writing to the Information Division, Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

Information food safety for the holidays is also available from USDA's APHIS Northeast Regional Information Office at 26 Federal Plaza (Room 1653), New York, N.Y. 10007.

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