

What's wrong with these home-canned foods?

WASHINGTON D.C. — Rows of glass jars, the fruit of last fall's labors, are standing on the pantry shelf. Each is a work of art — the pears showing white in the mint sauce, the beets a rich burgundy.

But what's wrong with the green beans? Why is the liquid milky? And why is the lid on the canned beef bulging?

"Problems can develop with home-canned goods," says Ralph Johnston a senior microbiologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, "particularly when someone is canning for the first time, like many of today's young, nutrition-conscious consumers."

"Home canning is a fine way to save money and serve high-quality meals too," Johnston, who is chief microbiologist for USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, says. "But there are some danger signs you should recognize, since botulism — a serious, though rare, form of food poisoning — can strike home-canned goods."

What are the danger signs?

The "milky" liquid in the green beans, Johnston says, is one. The cloudiness could be caused either by food poisoning or spoilage bacteria which have multiplied. Spoilage bacteria are not dangerous. They only cause decay.

"But since you can't tell what the problem is, don't even taste the beans," Johnston said. "Throw them out."

The swollen lid on the beef is another red flag. Again, a bacteria — gas-forming in this case — is probably the culprit. The gas increased the volume of the stew, pushing the lid out of shape.

"Don't take chances with a swollen lid," Johnston says, "throw the jar out."

Cracker jars and loose lids should sound an alarm too. Dispose of jars with either problem.

In disposing of possibly contaminated canned goods, you should be very careful, Johnston says. Wrap the cans or jars in plastic and then in heavy paper bags. Put them in a closed garbage

can which neither children nor animals can open. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling the jars. You could be dealing with botulism, which is dangerous if you should get even a tiny amount in your mouth.

Watch where you store both home and commercially prepared canned goods, Johnston says. Ideal storage is a clean, cool, dry space away from bright sunlight and extreme temperatures. Dryness is important to prevent rusting, which can destroy the tight seal of metal lids, letting bacteria in.

To play it safe before serving home-canned foods, you should:

— Bring all home-canned meat, poultry and vegetables to a rolling boil before tasting for quality and seasoning. Heating is an excellent check because it brings out spoilage odors that may not be apparent at room temperature. If a product smells right:

— Lower the heat and continue boiling it for ten minutes more before serving. The additional

boiling should kill any bacteria still present, and render any botulism poison harmless.

Because meat and poultry products have a higher risk of botulism and heat at slower rates due to their density, they should be boiled 20 minutes in a covered pan before tasting.

Spinach and corn — high-risk vegetables — must also be boiled 20 minutes before tasting. Still, if after boiling you notice a spoiled odor, the food is foaming or looks strange, throw it out without tasting.

"We keep saying 'Don't taste, don't taste' when we tell people how to test home-canned products," says Johnston, "but we can't say it often enough, because of the botulism danger."

"According to the national Centers for Disease Control, there are only 20 to 30 cases of botulism a year now, with less than 10 percent fatalities, but it still can't be taken lightly."

Canned goods are ideal for the growth of Clostridium botulinum

because canning removes oxygen from food, Johnston said. The botulinum bacteria grow where there is no oxygen.

How does botulism make you sick?

"It's a poison that attacks the nervous system," Johnston says, "particularly those nerves that connect to muscles. Onset is 12 to 36 hours after eating, with symptoms of double vision, trouble swallowing and difficulty in breathing. If the disease is not treated, a person could die because the nerves would no longer instruct the chest muscles to breathe."

"If you ever have reason to believe someone has contracted botulism, rush that person to a hospital. There is an anti-toxin."

It's also important, Johnston says, to save the suspect food. Put it in a plastic bag or re-close the jar, marking it "Danger," and refrigerate. You may need the food to guide treatment of the patient. If it's a commercial product, local and federal public health officials will examine it to see if an emergency product recall — where the food would be removed from stores and warehouses and consumers would be alerted through the news media — is necessary.



Danger! Cloudy liquid that should be clear (left), a bulging lid (center) or a crack in the jar (right) could be signs of botulism — a rare, but deadly food

poisoning. The jars on the right in each picture are normal.

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