

Consuming Thoughts

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Perhaps you heard about the people who were hospitalized after eating undercooked hamburgers at a restaurant or school that contained E. coli bacteria. There also has been serious food-related E. coli outbreaks across the United States and in Canada, a number of nursing home residents have died from E. coli contaminated food.

People ask if this is the same E. coli bacteria we've always considered a harmless dweller in the intestinal tract? The answer is yes — there are types of E. coli that live peacefully in the human intestine. They keep the growth of more harmful organisms in check and even produce some B vitamins for us.

But there are other types of E. coli that cause traveler's diarrhea and more serious diarrhea in young children, particularly in the Third World countries. And there's this other villain — E. coli O157:H7 that's been causing a lot of trouble.

This bacteria was first identified by scientists in the early 1980s when illness with bloody stools was reported in people who'd eaten undercooked ham-

burgers from some fast food outlets, this new bacterial strain has emerged as even more troublesome than some experts first thought.

E. coli - O157:H7 is capable of causing more serious disease than most foodborne bacteria and has caused fatalities in the elderly. In the very young, the elderly and the immune deficient, the complications of infection with E. coli can be quite serious.

People often ask how they get the E. coli infections. Since thorough cooking kills this bacteria, most cases have involved people eating undercooked ground beef or drinking unpasteurized milk. Bacteria are destroyed by high heat in normal pasteurization.

But when these E. coli bacteria are consumed in food that hasn't been properly cooked or pasteurized, getting the illness is easy — roughly 30 to 60 percent of those exposed get sick.

Symptoms like severe abdominal cramps, diarrhea which is often bloody, nausea, vomiting and a low fever may develop three to four days after eating contaminated food. The disease can last up to

10 days and because of its severity often requires hospitalization.

The bacteria can travel through animal-to-animal, meat animal-to-human and human-to-human contacts. Therefore people can get sick from contaminated raw food of animal origin or, it seems likely, when infected food handlers contaminate food eaten raw or undercooked.

While the bad news is that E. coli causes food poisoning with symptoms ranging from acute discomfort and diarrhea to kidney failure and death, the good news is that you can protect yourself.

The bacteria is killed by thorough cooking. So don't eat rare-in-the-middle meats when you're out, and cook and handle food carefully at home. This advice is critically important for the young, the elderly or anyone with a weakened immune system.

Protect Yourself at Home By Observing These Rules:

1. Never drink raw milk. Use pasteurized milk.
2. After shopping, quickly freeze or refrigerate perishable foods.
3. Use refrigerated ground meat and patties in three to four days; frozen meat and patties in three to 4 months.
4. Wash your hands, utensils and work area with hot, soapy water after contact with raw meat and meat patties.
5. Cook meat and patties until very hot. The center should be gray or brown. Juices should run clear with no trace of pink. All meat, poultry and fish should be well cooked.
6. Serve cooked food with clean plates and utensils.
7. Check package directions.

You might need to pre-heat the oven or grill. Cook for required time period. Cook covered if directions call for that.

8. Microwave carefully. If your oven is a lower wattage than what is shown in the instructions, you'll need to cook food longer or at a

higher setting. Rotate food for even cooking. Let food stand outside the oven after cooking if so directed. The food will finish cooking as it stands.

9. Never thaw food on the counter or let it sit out of the refrigerator over two hours!

Examine Blooming Income Source

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Farmers in search of an alternative crop or a blooming source of income can discover how to start a cut-flower farming operation by visiting Ag Progress Days, sponsored by Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences, Aug. 17-19.

Experts from the college's department of horticulture and Penn State Cooperative Extension will be on hand at the Cut-Flower Demonstration/Ask The Experts tent on East 7th St. to answer questions and distribute literature on cut-flower operations. The event is held at the university's Russell E. Larson Agricultural Research Center at Rock Springs, near State College.

"Cut flowers really have piqued the interest of farmers and other businessmen as a cash crop that can be sold at farmer's markets and other outlets," says Robert Berghage, assistant professor of horticulture. "The cash return on a small, well-managed plot of flowers is a lot more than you would get from an acre of corn."

The staff also will hold flower arranging demonstrations using flowers from the demonstration plots at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily in

the tent.

Berghage says the demonstration area will showcase more than 90 flower varieties, including zinnias, asters, celosia, sunflowers, strawflowers and other annuals, as well as several varieties of woody plants used in the cut-flower market. "We also will display some unique flower varieties that are not widely known on the market," Berghage says.

Visitors can get fact sheets and information on business opportunities, weed control, budgeting and crop handling.

Penn State's Ag Progress Days features more than 500 acres of educational and commercial exhibits, tours and machinery demonstrations. It is held at the Russell E. Larson Agricultural Research Center at Rock Springs, nine miles southwest of State College on Route 45. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, with extended hours of 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Wednesday. Admission and parking are free.

For more information, call (800) PSU-1010 toll-free from July 12 to August 19 or visit the Ag Progress Days site on the World Wide Web at <http://apd.cas.psu.edu>.

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