

Food Safety In The Home

Summary of Significant Trends:

While our food supply is among the safest in the world, each year an estimated 76 million Americans still contract foodborne illness, and some—mostly the very young, elderly, and the chronically ill—die as a result. Hospitalization costs for these illnesses are estimated at more than \$3 billion a year and costs from lost productivity are much higher. Most of these illnesses could have been prevented if safe food handling practices had been applied.

Emerging Trends:

In recent years, much has changed about what we eat and where we eat. Americans are eating a greater variety of food, particularly poultry, seafood, and fresh fruit and vegetables. This is beneficial to our health but presents new food safety challenges. Our vulnerable populations are also growing, with increasing longevity and the increasing number of immuno-compromised individuals. At present nearly a quarter of the U.S. population is at high risk for foodborne illness.

The best way to prevent foodborne illness is to apply safe food handling practices when preparing food. Since 1993, the self-reported use of some safe food handling practices has increased—washing hands before preparing food and after handling raw meat or poultry and

properly cleaning cutting boards and other surfaces to prevent cross-contamination. Self-report does not always indicate actual practices. For example, 87% of participants in a study conducted by Utah State University reported that they wash their hands all or most of the time before food preparation. However, only 45% actually did so when observed. Of those who actually did so, only 3% used soap and warm water. Consumers also have some knowledge about foodborne pathogens, high risk foods, and high risk populations but their knowledge is sometimes wrong or incomplete. For example, most consumers believe that foodborne illness originates in food processing plants and restaurants and not their homes. Experts believe that most cases of foodborne illness are probably due to unsafe handling practices in the home. Many individuals are also not aware that pregnant females are at a greater risk for foodborne illness. Research results like these illustrate the need to continue to educate the public about food safety.

Relevance of Trends to County Programs:

The best way to improve safe food handling practices in the home is through education. Foodborne illness is nearly 100% preventable if safe food handling practices are applied. The County Extension Center is, and has been, the

primary source of food safety information for consumers as evident by the number of calls each year from consumers asking questions about food safety. Extension agents are also well known for the breadth and quality of their food safety education programs.

Sources of Supporting Data:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—
U.S. Foodborne Disease Outbreaks

[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/outbreak/
us_outb.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/outbreak/us_outb.htm)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—
Food-related Illness and Death in the United
States

[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/eid/vol5no5/
mead.htm#Figure@201](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/eid/vol5no5/mead.htm#Figure@201)

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