

Get a Meat Thermometer!



By Dr. Rosana Salvaterra,
Medical Officer of Public
Health, Peterborough

December heralds a time for cooking, baking and entertaining, and this year, I am hoping Santa brings you a meat thermometer! It's estimated that four million (1 in 8) Canadians suffer from a foodborne illness each year. Though most cases are mild and self-limiting there are an estimated 11,600 hospitalizations and 238 deaths attributed to different foodborne illnesses in Canada each year. The most serious cases tend to affect seniors, young children, people with weakened immune systems and pregnant women. The majority of these illnesses are the result of consuming food that's been contaminated with either viruses or bacteria. Some foods, like meat and poultry, carry bacteria as a habit. Others, like fruits and vegetables or any food that is handled and ready-to-eat, like bread, can pick up bacteria and viruses on their way to your plate.

Most foods, including pieces of poultry and frozen raw breaded chicken products, can be made safe by cooking to an internal temperature of 74°C (165°F). It is recommended that whole poultry be cooked to 82°C (180°F). The best thermometers are those that can be calibrated – and an easy way to do that is to plunge them into a glass of icy slush to ensure that they detect a temperature of 0°C (32°F). And it is important when preparing meats that you don't cross-contaminate your kitchen surfaces or equipment. A simple chlorine bleach solution (1 teaspoon of bleach added to 1 litre of water) can be used to sanitize surfaces after cleaning. Allow this bleach solution to sit on the contaminated surface for 45 seconds before wiping dry with a paper towel.

Speaking of sitting, the danger zone for many foods is room temperature. Whether the meat is raw, or has been cooked, bacteria and viruses present can happily multiply when they are feeling so cozy. This is when refrigeration becomes your best friend. Here too, a thermometer can tell you if you are chilling foods enough to break up the party. By regularly checking to make sure the fridge is at 4°C (40°F) or below, our food stays fresher for longer and microorganism growth is stopped or slowed down to a crawl. The bottom of the fridge is the best place to defrost frozen meat, not the kitchen counter. And food that has been sitting out at room temperature for two hours or more should be discarded, unfortunately. A good way to prevent the unnecessary wastage of food is to keep it hot, in a chafing dish while being served, and then slipping it back into the fridge

when the eating is done. We recommend that food be stored in small enough quantities to allow it to cool as quickly as possible, getting it out of that "danger" zone.

It's nice to have help in the kitchen but make sure any helpers wash their hands as they roll up their sleeves, and keep anyone with any kind of current or recent illness as far away from meal preparation as is culturally acceptable! People can spread a common virus like "Norovirus", also known as "stomach flu" for up to two weeks after they have recovered. Noroviruses are very contagious and are estimated to account for 65% of the known causes of foodborne illness. These viruses can survive on surfaces for up to twelve days and outbreaks are most common during these colder months.

Bacteria and viruses in foods may not always make us sick immediately – some organisms, like Salmonella or E. coli can take days to show up. Others, like hepatitis, can take weeks. Which is one reason why many of us don't even know when we've been hit with a foodborne illness. Recent outbreaks have been linked to romaine lettuce and cucumbers (suspected). When the Canadian Food Inspection Agency issues public recalls or warnings it's best to heed to their advice and steer clear of the foods in question. You can sign up for email alerts via their website: www.inspection.gc.ca.

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