

Older Adults Face More Risk from Foodborne Illnesses

It is true that older adults are at more risk for serious complications from foodborne illnesses.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, people 65 years or older experience just 13 percent of all foodborne illness infections but account for 24 percent of hospitalizations and 57 percent of deaths.

What makes older people more susceptible to foodborne illnesses? The U.S.D.A. offers an explanation in its Food Safety for Older Adults guide:

- As a person gets older, their liver and kidneys may not rid the body of toxins as readily.
- The stomach and intestinal tract may hold onto foods for longer periods, offering foodborne pathogens more opportunity to cause problems.
- The immune system tends to become more sluggish as a person ages, reducing the body's ability to fight off harmful bacteria or other pathogens.
- Older people are more likely to have a chronic condition, such as diabetes, arthritis, cancer or heart disease, and are also more likely to regularly take medications. Both chronic conditions and some medications can further weaken the immune system.
- As a person ages, their senses of smell and taste may change, reducing the ability to spot warning signs of food that has gone bad. However, it is important to note that many foodborne disease pathogens don't provide clues that warn you that the food is bad.

It is important for everyone 65 and older and those who care for them to take basic food safety precautions.

- Wash hands often. This helps prevent the spread of bacteria. Twenty seconds is a good measure with soap and warm water.
- Clean surfaces often. Wash countertops, tabletops, and all areas where food may be put regularly. Use warm soapy water to clean tops. Come back with a sanitizer to clean and allow to air dry.
- Prevent cross-contamination. Separate raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs from other foods. Consider using separate cutting boards for raw foods and foods that are ready to eat.
- Cook foods to safe temperatures. Use a food thermometer to be sure you cook food especially meats. Cook poultry including ground chicken and turkey to 165 degrees F., as well as hot dogs, gravy sauces and leftovers; ground meat, beef or pork to 155 degrees F, Seafood, beef, lamb pork and veal steaks, roasts and chops to 145 degrees with an additional 3 minute rest time after removing them from the heat.
- Refrigerate food promptly within two hours of cooking or purchasing.
- Avoid risky foods such as soft cheeses made with raw milk; unpasteurized milk; undercooked eggs; raw meat, raw poultry; raw fish; raw shellfish and their juices; and luncheon meats and deli-type salads without added preservatives prepared on site in a deli-type establishment.

For more food safety information related to older adults, see the FDA's guide at bit.ly/fdsafeolderadults.

Sources: Ohio State University Extension; Center for Disease Control and Prevention; and Food and Drug Administration.