

Make Picnics Safer Against Foodborne Bacteria

July we have many celebrations including National Picnic Month. Here are some tips to help make your picnic safer and protect against foodborne bacteria that come from Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Specialists Dr. Jenna Anding and Rebecca Dittmar.

Food safety begins with cleanliness. Make sure your hands, surfaces that you prepare and serve food and all utensils are clean.

If there is not running water, use a thermos with a lid filled with warm water and have soap and paper towels or moist disposable wipes to clean hands. Make sure all utensils and platters have been adequately cleaned and are kept separate from food or other items to avoid possible cross-contamination.

The same plate and utensils used to prepare and carry raw food should not be used for serving cooked food. Use a clean plate and utensil set for cooked foods. This will reduce the risk of bacteria being transferred.

Separating foods and using coolers can assist in ensuring a safe picnic. Keep raw meat, poultry and seafood securely wrapped and stored separately in a cooler, away from other foods that are expected to be eaten raw, such as fruits and vegetables. Also, don't partially cook meats with plans for finish cooking them at the picnic. Cook them fully and thoroughly either at home or at the picnic site.

Also, place beverages in one cooler and perishable food in another. That way, you don't have to frequently reopen the same cooler your food is in to get a drink. Opening the cooler fewer times will expose perishable foods less to warm outdoor air temperatures.

Keeping food at the proper temperature is important to helping prevent the growth of foodborne bacteria. For a picnic, it is important to keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot. Cold perishable foods should be kept at 40 degrees or lower until serving time. Hot food should be kept hot at 140 degrees or warmer.

Harmful bacteria grow most rapidly at temperatures between 40 and 140. We refer this as the danger zone for bacterial growth.

Cold foods in individual serving dishes can be placed directly on ice or in a shallow container set in a pan filled with ice. Drain off water as ice melts and replace ice frequently.

With both cold and hot foods, the general rule for food safety is to not let them sit out for more than two hours or one hour if the outside temperature is above 90 degrees. If food is left out longer, the safest choice would be to throw the food away.

Once you return home, unpack the cooler as soon as possible after returning home. Refrigerate any leftover meats and salads that have remained cold while in the cooler. Discard any foods that may have become too warm.