

# Botulism toxin weighs deadly

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

All you ever wanted to know about everything from rusty pipes to over-ripe foods is now available through the Oakland County Extension Service.

Known as "Handy Hints on Call," the number for the service is 858-2519. New messages on horticulture, agriculture, culture, natural resources, foods and nutrition, consumer information, and home and family tips are added every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Another addition to the service is a Food Preservation Hot Line—858-0304—which was inaugurated in early May to help consumers learn how to can, freeze and preserve foods without poisoning their families.

The new service is an outgrowth of last year's botulism incident at a Mexican food restaurant in Pontiac, said Lois Thieleke, the home economist who oversees the service.

The program, she said, was established for only a few weeks a year ago. This year, the service has been extended and will continue through Oct. 1. In addition, Ms. Thieleke will be available to go about the county giving talks and demonstrations on the proper methods of caring for food.

"I'M YOUR tax dollars at work," she said. "I'm here to do whatever I can for individuals or organizations. All they have to do is ask."

She hopes consumers and organizations will ask for tips on caring for foods whether at home or on a picnic.

"There are dozens of things that people do wrong when handling their foods," she said. "And now, with people being more interested than ever in growing vegetables, even if it's on a window sill, it's more important than ever that they know how to do it properly."

For instance, Mrs. Thieleke suggests that when in doubt, keep your fingers out of it until you are sure the food is safe.

"It only takes one-quarter teaspoonful of botulism toxin to kill you," she said. "Most people don't know what botulism really is. Botulism is food poisoning at its extreme.

"Unlike salmonella or other forms of food poisoning, botulism grows in the soil. With proper precautions, it will die."

"But it likes to grow in something warm and moist. Low-acid foods are its favorite growing place, and it needs no oxygen to exist."

"THE WORST part about it is that it attacks the respiratory system. We were very lucky with the attack last year, although there are some people who are still suffering the effects of having had it."

Mrs. Thieleke said the service will handle all types of food-related questions. Whenever possible, the questions will be answered during the course of the call. The more difficult ones will be referred to Michigan State University and the answer phoned back to the caller.

Among the calls the service has already received was one about the length of time that meats can be stored safely in a freezer. Could a turkey be stored for six years and still be edible? Another caller asked how to ship lettuce to Chicago; and a third caller wondered whether breast milk can be frozen.

"Like many things, breast milk can be frozen, but only with the proper procedures," Mrs. Thieleke said. Such procedures are just as important whether the food is to be frozen, canned or served on the table.

Common preparation mistakes, she added, are not reading the recipe, not following directions, and cheating on the times and temperatures when preparing foods.

"We also get calls asking us what to do when frezers go out," she said. The service maintains a list of items which may be saved and which should be disposed.

Of particular interest to Mrs. Thieleke at this time of year is the preparation and protection of foods that will make up picnic fare.

"We try to get the consumer to think about what they are taking with them," she said. "The important thing is to keep it cold or hot or don't take it. That means that everything has to be over 140 degrees or under 40 degrees.

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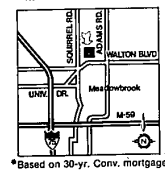
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