

Food for thought When in doubt, throw it out

You don't feel good. Your stomach is upset. You have abdominal pain, diarrhea, perhaps a headache. You may think that you are coming down with a cold or the flu. That's possible. But it's also possible that you have fallen victim to one of the "Infectious Four."

The "Infectious Four" aren't a subversive group warring for bombing a bank or kidnapping an heiress. These are four common causes of food poisoning — salmonella, clostridium perfringens, staphylococcus, and clostridium botulinum.

Don't be fooled by the big names. They are simple, little bacteria organisms that multiply by dividing. And all they need to divide themselves are food, warmth and moisture.

To protect yourself it is wise to assume that the four bacteria are present in all foods because they are everywhere in the environment. Tiny though they may be, they are known to cause illness and in extreme cases even death.

In spite of the fact that many people, from the farmer through the retailer, work to protect the consumer from the bacteria, between the super market shelf and the dinner table the consumer is the one responsible for protecting his food.

The responsibility begins the moment he selects the food in the store. As soon as he enters the store he should stand warned. Don't buy any food in containers that are out-dated, broken, bent or leaky. Especially avoid bulging cans, because the food they contain could contain lethal botulinum toxin.

Make sure meat, poultry and frozen foods are kept cold. Make a habit of buying them last so they don't warm up or defrost in the cart while you shop. Also make a habit of placing the grocery store at the end of your errand list so that you go home immediately after your shopping is completed.

Place meat and poultry in the refrigerator as quickly as possible. Make a mental note to inspect whether the refrigerator is warmer than 40 degrees F, and the freezer remains at 0 degrees F. Put frozen foods in the freezer right away to make sure that any bacterium in the food is prevented from growing.

When fresh meat, poultry, or frozen foods are taken from the refrigerator for cooking, don't do any favors for the "Infectious Four." Thaw foods in the refrigerator, or cook them frozen. If you must thaw in a hurry, do so in a water-tight plastic bag submerged in cold water. Never thaw frozen food uncovered on a kitchen counter at room temperature.

The way bacteria usually strike in the home is through under proper

cooking temperatures, an illness from cross-contamination can occur only if whoever prepares the food fails to take the right precautions during preparation.

For instance, a chicken has been thawed and cut up on a cutting board. Other foods are then prepared with the same knife and cutting board without first washing the utensils and hands in hot water and soap. Prepare food in that manner and whatever else is prepared is contaminated.

Another example, say you have cooked potatoes or potato salad. You slice them with the same knife on the same cutting board which was used for the raw chicken without washing either the board, knife, or hands. Salmonella bacteria is transferred to the potatoes. Then, take the salad on a picnic where temperatures are warm enough for bacterial growth. They will multiply rapidly to the levels where infection can occur.

GOOD HABITS in the kitchen can help prevent such food contamination. Don't keep main dishes at room temperature for longer than two hours before serving. Remember, bacteria grow rapidly at room temperature.

Follow simple hygienic practices. Use rubber gloves if you have cuts or sores on your hands. That not only keeps bacteria out of the sores, it also keeps bacteria from the sores from getting into the food.

Put leftovers into the refrigerator as soon as the meal is over. Refrigerate them in small shallow containers so they will cool quickly.

Pets are also carriers of the infectious bacteria. After handling pets, wash your hands before working with food. Don't allow pet feeding dishes, toys, or bedding in the kitchen. Don't let pets touch food, utensils, or food-working surfaces.

Also make a point of learning about the "Infectious Four."

SALMONELLA — Commonly found in raw meats, poultry, eggs, milk, fish, and products made from them, plus pets (dogs, cats, turtles, birds, and fish). Salmonella is one of the most common causes of food poisoning. While not often fatal, it is widespread. More than two million cases of this type of poisoning are believed to occur in the U.S. each year.

There is no way to tell by looking at, tasting, or smelling the food whether salmonella germs are present. To avoid them, do not handle the food excessively and keep it below 40 degrees F, or above 140 degrees F.

Symptoms of salmonella infection are fever, headache, diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, and occasionally vomiting which usually appear

within 24 hours of eating contaminated food. Most people recover in two to four days.

CLOSTRIDIUM PERFRINGENS — Widely distributed in nature — in the soil, dust, on food, and in the intestinal tracts of man and other warm-blooded animals. It is more widespread over the earth than any other disease-causing micro-organism.

Disease outbreaks frequently occur when foods are held in large quantities at improper temperatures for several hours or overnight and are closely associated with restaurants or other large feeding establishments where foods are held for long periods of time on steam tables or other warming devices.

To avoid perfringens, meats should be properly cooked, kept hot (above 140 degrees F) and served hot. If meat is cooked for later use, cool the meat rapidly in small containers in a refrigerator to 40 degrees F or below. Thoroughly reheat leftover meats or meat dishes before serving, and bring leftover gravy to a rolling boil before serving. Maintain cold cuts and cold sliced meats below 40 degrees F, and serve them cold.

Large number of perfringens bacteria can cause diarrhea and abdominal pain in from four to 22 hours — usually about 12 hours after consumption.

STAPHYLOCOCCUS — Known generally as "staph," this bacteria is also quite common. Staph organisms are in your respiratory passages and on your skin. They usually enter food from a human or an animal.

The germs grow in a wide variety of foods, including all meats, poultry and egg products, egg, tuna, chicken, potato, or macaroni salads, cream filled pastries, and sandwich fillings. If staph germs are allowed to multiply to high levels, they for a toxin which cannot be boiled or baked away.

Symptoms of staph food poisoning are diarrhea, vomiting, and abdominal cramps. They appear two to four hours after eating and may bother you for 24 to 48 hours. Staph food poisoning is rarely fatal.

CLOSTRIDIUM BOTULINUM — While rare, this form of food poisoning is usually fatal. A tiny amount of the toxin poison from botulism germs can kill. Spores are found throughout the environment and are harmless. However, in the proper environment, and when destroyed by heat, the spores divide and produce poisonous toxins. Ingestion of food contaminated with the germs can cause illness and death. High heat, however, makes the toxin harmless.

Thursday, July 12, 1979

(F)15A

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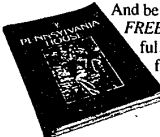
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