

EXTENSION CONNECTION –Senior Food Safety

By: Paulelda Gilbert, ISU Extension Nutrition & Health Specialist

Q. Should I be more concerned about food safety as I get older?

A. Have you ever eaten something that caused you to feel sick? Chances are that the symptoms were unpleasant, but in a day or two you returned to normal health. The unpleasant symptoms were most likely due to what is known as foodborne illness.

For older people foodborne illness can be more than unpleasant – it can be very serious resulting in hospitalization and even death. Foodborne illness, or food poisoning, is caused by consuming food contaminated with pathogenic bacteria, toxins, viruses, or parasites. Such contamination usually arises from improper handling, preparation, or storage of food.

As our population ages the challenge continues. Our immune system helps to fight infection, and if our immune system or “defense mechanism” starts to weaken, foodborne illness can become more frequent and severe. Like the onset of gray hair, the weakening of the body’s immune system often goes along with aging.

Q. What can older adults do to reduce their risk of a foodborne illness?

A. Be sure to cook all meats thoroughly to correct temperature to help ensure their safety. Use precaution when cooking in a microwave, since uneven cooking may occur. The use of meat thermometer can help ensure that food will be cooked to temperatures sufficient to kill harmful bacteria. Here are safety guidelines for the temperature that the middle of the food should reach:

- Beef, lamb or veal steaks & roasts: medium rare - 145° F and medium - 160° F
- Pork, ham, sausage, or bacon: 155° F
- Ground turkey & chicken, stuffed meats, casseroles, and leftovers: 165° F
- Ground beef, pork, veal & lamb, pork chops, ribs & roasts, egg dishes: 160° F
- Chicken & turkey breasts: 170° F
- Chicken & turkey whole bird, legs, thighs & wings: 180° F

Leftover foods from a meal should not stay out of the refrigerator for longer than two hours, and on hot summer days (>90° F) no longer than one hour.

As the baby-boom generation continues to age, the population of older Americans, and hence those with increased risk of foodborne illness, will continue to rise. *Information taken from Food Insight Newsletter, IFIC Foundation.*