

Picnic Food Safety

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Q. We are having a large family reunion picnic Labor Day week-end. I know food safety can be an issue when serving foods outdoors. What are some tips for keeping food safe outdoors?

A. There are always ants at a picnic. While you can see ants and avoid them, it's not always possible to see, taste or smell dangerous bacteria that may cause illness if food is mishandled. When preparing large quantities of food, transporting them for outdoor eating, and when serving a variety of age groups (the very young and the elderly are at higher risk for food borne illnesses), following good food safety and sanitation practices become even more important.

Bacteria grow and multiply rapidly in the danger zone between 40° F and 140° F (out of the refrigerator or before food begins to cook). So, food transported without an ice source or left out in the sun at a picnic won't stay safe for long. Family and friends who eat mishandled food may get the flu-like symptoms caused by foodborne illness.

Follow these tips for packing a safe picnic:

- Try to plan just the right amount of foods to take. That way, you won't have to worry about the storage or safety of leftovers.
- Clean preparation is essential. Wash hands and work areas; be sure all utensils are clean before preparing food.
- Foods cooked ahead need to be cooked in plenty time to thoroughly chill in the refrigerator. Use an insulated cooler with sufficient ice or ice packs to keep the food at 40°F. Pack food from the refrigerator right into the cooler.
- If you're planning on take-out foods such as fried chicken or barbecued beef, eat them within two hours of pick-up or buy ahead of time and chill before packing the foods into the cooler.
- Don't put the cooler in the trunk; carry it inside the air-conditioned car.
- At the picnic, keep the cooler in the shade. Keep the lid closed and avoid repeated openings. Replenish the ice if it melts.
- Use a separate cooler for drinks so the one containing perishable food won't be constantly opened and closed.
- Place salads on the table with a bowl or tray of ice underneath.
- Place leftover foods in the cooler soon after grilling or serving. Any left outside for more than an hour should be discarded. If there is still ice in the cooler when you get home, the leftovers are okay to eat.

Meat requires special care: When handling raw meat, remove from the cooler only the amount that will fit on the grill. USDA recommends that you don't eat raw or undercooked ground beef, since harmful bacteria could be present.

To be sure bacteria are destroyed, cook hamburgers and ribs to 160 degrees F (medium doneness) or until the center is no longer pink and the juices are clear. Cook ground poultry to 165°F and poultry parts to 180° F. Reheat precooked meats until steaming hot.

Do not partially grill extra hamburgers to use later. Once you begin cooking hamburgers by any method, cook them until completely done to assure that bacteria are destroyed.

When taking foods off the grill, put them on a clean plate. Don't put cooked food on a platter that held raw meat.

Remember, bacteria can be present in most any food as well as on people's hands. Safe food handling is essential for safe picnics.

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 576-2119 or e-mail pgilbert@iastate.edu, with your nutrition and health questions. You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804.