Getting creative with homemade salsa could lead to foodborne illness – stick to research based recipes when canning.

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach food safety expert insist it is important to use a tested or research based recipe when canning homemade salsa.

This time of the year, as I teach food preservation classes and answer consumer calls, many of the questions I receive are about salsa. People can become very creative when they make their own salsa. Quite often questions pertain to how long should they process their homemade salsa or their friend gave them this great recipe, is it safe to can? Iowa State University Extension and Outreach food safety expert, Barb Fuller, answer will always be the same – it is important to use a tested or research based recipe when canning homemade salsa. The reason being, the ratio of low acid vegetables (tomatoes, peppers, onion and garlic) to acid (lemon juice, lime juice or vinegar) has not been tested in a non-research based recipe. Recipes that have been tested will have enough acid to prevent the growth of the botulism bacteria and provide a safe product that everyone can enjoy straight from the canning jar.

Salsa is very easy to make by combining acidic and low acid vegetables. Onions, peppers and garlic are considered low acid foods. Creating a safe product that you can process and store on a shelf means you have to add enough of the correct type of acid to prevent the growth of botulism bacteria. The best way to ensure a safe salsa is to always follow a tested or research based recipe. These recipes can be found at the National Center for Home Food Preservation, and The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Complete Guide to Home Canning.

Important salsa making tips to remember:
Always use high quality ingredients, tomatoes, peppers, onions and garlic. Putting them in a canning jar and processing them will not improve the quality of fresh ingredients.

Never increase the total volume of peppers in a recipe. You can always substitute one variety of a pepper for another, to adjust the hotness or mildness of the product.

Always use the acid listed in the recipe and the prescribed amount; bottled lemon or lime juice (never fresh lemon or lime juice), vinegar with five percent acidity (never homemade vinegar).

Spices may be adjusted to taste for flavor. This is the only safe ingredient you may change in a tested recipe.

A tested recipe allows you to process a safe salsa in a boiling water bath canner. If you decide to use a recipe of your own or doctor a recipe you may safely freeze that batch of salsa, but you cannot safely home can it.

Never thicken salsa before canning. As you open jars of salsa to serve, you can thicken by adding fresh ingredients or pour off excess liquid.

Once the salsa is opened for serving you may add extra ingredients, never before processing.

Without expensive testing equipment, there is no real safe way to know if homemade salsa is safe; if a research based recipe wasn’t followed. The result of botulism can lead to months in a hospital, rehab facility or death. No canned salsa is worth a risk like that.

If you decide to “create” your own recipe and not follow a research based recipe then make a safe call and freeze your special salsa or make just enough to serve it fresh and enjoy it as it is made. Remember there are many safe research based- tested recipes available to you, check out the resources mentioned earlier in this article and enjoy a safe salsa!

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach AnswerLine can help you. Call 1-800-262-3804 during the week and you will be able to talk to an expert about food preservation including canning, freezing, or dehydrating.