

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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How Safe Is Your Food

Are you still eating vegetables, now that the latest CDC report on foodborne illnesses came out? I certainly hope so! Some of the headlines about the new numbers were a lot scarier than the numbers themselves are. There are plenty of things you can do at home to keep your food safe, so how safe it is depends on you.

The report covered all the illness outbreaks from 1998 to 2008 that the CDC could track to a particular food. They counted how many people got sick, how many needed a hospital stay to recover, and how many died, and tied those numbers to the different food categories. One thing that might surprise some people is that the great majority, almost 80%, of these illnesses did not make national news. They were mostly small events, maybe just a couple of people each time.

Not surprisingly, plant foods and fresh produce were at the top of the list for numbers of people who got sick. And why not? We eat most fruits and a lot of vegetables raw. No cooking means no chance to kill whatever might be there. We ship billions of tons of fresh fruits and vegetables around the world. The further and longer they are transported, the more chances there are for them to become contaminated. It's important to realize that even in the 4 years since 2008 a lot of improvements have been made in fresh produce handling, so we're safer now than we were then.

Washing fruits and vegetables before using them is so easy. But lots of people seem to skip that step. There's little evidence that using commercial 'vegetable washes' will do any good. Plain running water with gentle scrubbing for soft produce, or with a vegetable brush for firmer items is about as good as it gets. Don't use detergent! Eating soap is not good. And interestingly, the old 'blow on your apple and scrub it on your shirt' actually helped a lot, as long as the shirt was clean!

Be sure to keep all cut fruits and vegetables refrigerated. Bacteria grow a lot faster at room temperature, fast enough to make us sick.

Soaking leafy greens in vinegar water helps a little. Use 1 cup of white vinegar in 3 cups of water, soak the leaves for 5 minutes while you slosh them around, or 10 minutes if you just leave them sit still. You can expect that they might get a little water-logged around the edges, but this

treatment did reduce the numbers of bacteria. Unfortunately it won't kill viruses, and leafy greens were the largest carrier of viruses.

Plant foods were lower on the list for number of people hospitalized, and lower yet for number of deaths. That's not too surprising either. The bacteria that do us the most damage generally prefer to grow in other animals. We cook most of our beef, poultry and pork, so we have a better chance of protecting ourselves.

Poultry and dairy products were the top two causes of death. Most, close to 80%, of the illnesses and deaths from dairy products were from raw, unpasteurized products. Pasteurization is the best way we have to kill the bacteria in dairy foods, so those who choose to skip that step are putting their families at much greater risk.

Cooking kills all the bacteria associated with poultry. Don't mess with washing or rinsing the chicken, that just scatters bacteria around your kitchen. Stick the chicken straight into the oven, or onto the grill and let the heat take care of all the bacteria. Use your food thermometer to be sure it got hot enough.

After the chicken or turkey is in the skillet or on the grill, wash the counter, sink, cutting board, plate, all utensils *and your hands* with hot soapy water. A wipe with a paper towel or sponge just spreads bacteria around. Be sure to use a clean plate, fork and tongs to handle the cooked chicken when it's done. Serve it up, nice and hot!

It's kumquat season, so here is a simple recipe for chicken sauced with kumquats. This bakes in the oven, a good way to warm up the kitchen one of these cool nights. Serve with rice or noodles and big green salad.

Citrus-y Baked Chicken

2 pounds chicken pieces (thighs, legs, breasts) 1 cup honey barbeque sauce

1 cup kumquat (or orange or apricot) preserves 1 envelope onion soup mix

Preheat oven to 350°F. Arrange chicken in single layer in baking dish. Combine barbeque sauce, preserves and soup mix in small bowl. Pour over chicken. Cover. Bake for 40 minutes. Remove cover and continue baking for 20 minutes or until thermometer in thickest piece of meat reads 165°F. Garnish with whole or sliced kumquats if desired. Serves 6.

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