

Student Food Safety

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Days are getting shorter and students are returning to school. Whether students are bringing their lunch to school each day, or preparing meals on their own for the first time in college, they must take care to ensure that the food they eat is safe (www.foodsafety.gov). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates 48 million people get sick from food-borne illness each year, with 48,000 requiring hospitalization. Sadly, 3000 die each year (www.cdc.gov). Helping clients understand how to keep their family safe during food preparation and consumption is another value-added service of the professional insurance agent.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) outlines the four steps in basic food safety: Clean, Separate, Cook and Chill. Food should be washed carefully, including raw fruits and vegetables with skins or rinds that are not eaten. Wash hands, preparation and cooking surfaces and utensils frequently with hot soapy water. Raw meat, poultry and fish should be kept separate from other foods. Cook food to the proper temperature, using a food thermometer to ensure doneness. Food should be refrigerated within two hours of cooking or purchase – one hour if temperatures are 90 degrees or more. Use appliance thermometers to be sure the temperatures are 40 degrees or below, and 0 degrees or less for freezers (www.fda.gov). It is not necessary to let foods cool prior to refrigerating.

Keep hot foods hot (140 degrees) and cold foods cold (40 degrees). Perishable food should never be left out at room temperature more than two hours. Bacteria grows quickly at temperatures between 40 and 140 degrees. In 90 degree temperatures, the limit is one hour. College students cooking on their own for the first time should be made aware of food safety procedures. Pizza or other perishable food that has been left out overnight is not safe to eat. Tasting food to see if it is still good is not recommended, as it is not possible to taste most bacteria.

There are numerous resources available offering tips on safe food handling and preparation. For those tech savvy individuals who want information at their fingertips, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends two food safety applications – Ask Karen and Foodkeeper. This information is also available online.

Care should be taken when packing lunches for children since food may be at room temperature for extended periods. Using insulated bags with a cold pack or ice is preferable to a brown bag to keep perishable food safe. Freezing juice boxes or water bottles will help keep food safe. Sending food back to college with students must also be done carefully. The same guidelines apply – two hours at room temperature - one



hour if it is 90 degrees or hotter. For hot foods, such as chili or soup, fill the thermos or container with boiling water for a few minutes prior to filling it with the food. Cold food should be refrigerated prior to travel when possible. Pack in a cooler with several layers of ice or freezer packs.

After school snacks are a welcome treat, but care is necessary to ensure safety, especially when heating them. Microwaves heat foods to high temperatures and heat unevenly. An average of 21 people per day are treated in emergency rooms for microwave-related injuries. Most injuries are to hands and fingers, but injuries to children more frequently involve the head and neck.

Microwave safe containers must be used. Heating plastics can leach chemicals into the food. Aluminum foil should not be used in the microwave, as it can cause a fire. Covering food helps it cook more evenly, but plastic wrap should not touch the food itself. Stir food to ensure even cooking. Use potholders when removing food from the microwave. Steam can cause burns, so care must be used when removing covers from microwaved food.

Microwave popcorn has long been a convenient go to snack for students. However, the prepackaged version contains chemicals that may be unsafe (<https://food.ndtv.com>) A healthier alternative is putting kernels in a brown paper bag or glass bowl that is covered with a plate.

Tailgate parties are another frequent activity for the fall, and it is important to practice safe food handling and storage procedures. Store food in a cooler with plenty of ice. Bring water and other cleaning supplies. Throw away anything that has been out two hours or more, or that is no longer chilled. Use a thermometer to ensure food is fully cooked since food on grills can char on the outside and still be uncooked (www.foodsafety.gov).

Safe food preparation is important to everyone. Food-borne illness is dangerous, especially for children away from home. Helping clients teach their children about keeping food safe is another value-added service of the true insurance professional.

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