

Don't Spoil a Good Picnic

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Ants and bad weather aren't the only things that can ruin a picnic. When food gets too hot or too cold, the chances of contamination and food-borne illness increase. Taking a few preventative measures when dining outdoors can reduce the risk of food poisoning greatly.

“As the weather gets warmer, people have to be more cautious about the temperature of food,” said Richard Fancher, sanitarian in the University of Missouri's Department of Environmental Health and Safety. “The temperature danger zone for food is 41 degrees to 140 degrees Fahrenheit. This means people should try to keep food temperatures outside of this range.”

Bacteria reproduce and grow the best in the temperature danger zone, Fancher said. Outdoor diners should be especially careful of mayonnaise, which is a common ingredient in popular picnic foods including sandwiches, potato salad and macaroni salad. Made with eggs, mayonnaise is susceptible to bacterial growth. Foods with mayonnaise should be kept in ice before and after a meal. Also, any foods that are high in moisture content and protein content, such as potatoes, beans, cooked pastas, tofu/soy products and melons, can be particularly hazardous.

“When grilling meats, be sure to cook them completely, especially hamburgers and brats,” Fancher said. “Due to the grinding process in the manufacture of ground beef, sausages, brats and other ground meats, a more potentially hazardous product is produced.”

Fancher advises cooking meats to a minimum of 160 degrees Fahrenheit. He suggests that any food not served immediately be kept hot or placed in the cooler. Raw meats should be placed in one cooler and ready-to-eat products placed in a separate cooler. A cooler with a drain plug is best when not using ice packs. Keeping foods in the shade as long as possible reduces the risk of foods reaching the temperature danger zone, Fancher said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that food-borne diseases cause 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths in the United States each year. Symptoms include upset stomach, abdominal cramps, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, fever, and dehydration.

Source: University of Missouri

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