

Teens less likely to wash hands when cooking, more likely to cross-contaminate raw food than adults

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A Kansas State University study has shown that when preparing frozen foods, adolescents are less likely than adults to wash their hands and are more susceptible to cross-contaminating raw foods while cooking.

"While half of the adults we observed washed their hands after touching raw chicken, none of the adolescents did," said Casey Jacob, a [food](#) safety research assistant at K-State. "The non-existent hand washing rate, combined with certain age-specific behaviors like hair flipping and scratching in a variety of areas, could lead directly to instances of cross-contamination compared to the adults."

[Food safety](#) isn't simple, and instructions for safe handling of frozen chicken entrees or strips are rarely followed by consumers despite their best intentions, said Doug Powell, K-State associate professor of food safety who led the study.

As the number and type of convenience meal solutions increases — check out the frozen food section of a local supermarket — the researchers found a need to understand how both adults and adolescents are preparing these products and what can be done to enhance the safety of frozen foods.

In 2007, K-State researchers developed a novel video capture system to observe the food preparation practices of 41 consumers - 21 primary

meal preparers and 20 adolescents - in a mock domestic kitchen using frozen, uncooked, commercially available breaded chicken products. The researchers wanted to determine actual food handling behavior of these two groups in relation to safe food handling practices and instructions provided on product labels. Self-report surveys were used to determine whether differences exist between consumers' reported food handling practices and observed behavior.

The research appeared in the November 2009 issue of the *British Food Journal*. In addition to Jacob and Powell, the authors were: Sarah DeDonder, K-State doctoral student in pathobiology; Brae Surgeoner, Powell's former graduate student; Benjamin Chapman, an assistant professor at North Carolina State University and Powell's former graduate student; and Randall Phebus, K-State professor of animal science and industry.

Beyond the discrepancy between adult and adolescent food safety practices, the researchers also found that even when provided with instructions, food preparers don't follow them. They may not have even seen them or they assume they know what to do.

"Our results suggest that while labels might contain correct risk-reduction steps, food manufacturers have to make that information as compelling as possible or it will be ignored," Chapman said.

They also found that observational research using discreet video recording is far more accurate than self-reported surveys. For example, while almost all of the primary meal preparers reported washing hands after every instance in which they touched raw poultry, only half were observed washing hands correctly after handling chicken products in the study.

Powell said that future work will examine the effectiveness of different

food safety labels, messages and delivery mechanisms on consumer behavior in their home kitchens.

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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