

Experts: Outdoor cooking, food safety important for July 4 celebrations

July 2 2012



Texas AgriLife Extension Service family and consumer sciences experts have tips for improving outdoor cooking safety, as well as keeping food safe, so the Fourth of July can be a more enjoyable experience. (Texas AgriLife Extension Service photo)

(Medical Xpress) -- On July 4th, many people will be firing up their grills and cooking food to eat outdoors, said Texas AgriLife Extension Service experts offering advice on both fire and food safety.

“People need to take extra care if they’re planning to grill outdoors, especially if it’s in an open area such as a public park,” said Joyce Cavanagh, AgriLife Extension specialist in family development and resource management in College Station. “Everyone should still be vigilant when it comes to outdoor cooking fire safety, especially since three out of four households have an outdoor grill and cooking out is a

huge July 4th tradition.”

The National Fire Protection Association data show that from 2005-2009 U.S. fire departments responded to an average of 8,200 home fires each year involving charcoal and gas grills and other means of outdoor cooking. These included approximately 3,400 structure fires and 4,800 outside fires, causing an average of 15 deaths and 120 injuries annually and \$75 million in direct property damage.

Some outdoor grilling fire safety tips offered by Cavanagh, other AgriLife Extension experts and the National Fire Protection Association are:

- Set up the grill on a concrete surface or on ground where grass and vegetation in the area are trimmed and where there are no dry leaves or brush in the vicinity.
- Place the grill in an open area away from deck railings, eaves, mulch or leaf piles, overhanging branches or other potentially combustible items.
- If using a gas grill, check for leaks and make sure hose connections are tight.
- Set the grill at least 10 feet away from your house or building, and do not grill in a garage or under a carport or other surface that might catch fire.
- Keep young children and pets at least 3 feet from the grill.
- Remove any grease or fat buildup from the grill and/or in the trays below the grill.
- Keep charcoal fluid out of the reach of children and away from heat sources.
- Never leave the grill unattended once the fire has been lit.
- Do not attempt to move a hot grill.
- Keep a multipurpose fire extinguisher within reach.
- Use flame-retardant mitts and grilling tools with long handles instead

of household forks or short-handled tongs.

- When finished grilling, let the coals completely cool before disposing, and use a metal container for disposal.
- If using a liquid propane grill, use extreme caution and always follow manufacturer recommendations for connecting or disconnecting the tank.

Along with fire safety, [food safety](#) is another important factor to consider when handling food and cooking outdoors, said Dr. Jenna Anding, AgriLife Extension food and nutrition unit program leader.

To maintain food quality and freshness, ensure proper temperatures are kept during storage and cooking.

“You need to begin by choosing meat, poultry or seafood that’s fresh and of high quality,” she said. “At the grocery store, select your meat last and get it home as soon as possible. If the trip from the grocery store to your home is more than a half-hour, take a cooler and put refrigerated items in it.”

Anding said poultry, fish, seafood or ground beef should be cooked or frozen within a day or two, and that steaks or pork chops should be cooked or frozen within four to five days.

“The safest way to thaw meat or poultry is by placing it in the refrigerator a day or two before you plan to cook it,” she added. “You can also thaw them in the microwave, but if you do, cook the food right away; don’t let it sit. Some foods may not thaw out evenly in the microwave and other parts of the food may be partially cooked, so it’s still better to let them thaw out it in the fridge.”

Avoid thawing meats at room temperature as this may increase the number of germs related to foodborne illness, Anding said.

If refrigerated food is being transported to another location for cooking, Anding said it should be kept at 40 degrees or colder, using a cooler and ice or ice packs, and only take what you plan to cook and eat that day.

She also said raw meat, poultry or seafood should be tightly wrapped or stored in a sealed bag or container, and kept in a different cooler than other foods.

Also, make sure hands, cooking area and cooking utensils are clean to reduce the spread of germs to the food.

“If you’re cooking away from home and not sure about a water source where you’re going, take your own water and paper towels or use an anti-bacterial hand sanitizer,” she said. “Be sure to clean your hands before and after touching raw meat, poultry or seafood. And make sure food preparation surfaces, cutting boards, grilling utensils and serving platters are washed and sanitized.”

Unwashed utensils and platters can still contaminate food, even if you’ve maintained proper food storage, preparation and cooking standards, she said.

“If you’ve placed raw meat or fish on a platter before grilling, do not use that same plate to serve the food unless it is first cleaned with hot, soapy water.”

Anding said foods on a grill can brown quickly and look as though they are sufficiently cooked when they are not. A food thermometer is the only way to ensure foods have been cooked to a safe internal temperature.

“Cook all poultry to 165 degrees, fully cook meats like hot dogs to 165 degrees and hamburgers to 160 degrees,” she said “Beef, pork, lamb and

veal steaks, chops and roasts should be cooked to at least 145 degrees. For safety, however, allow these foods to ‘rest’ for three minutes after removing them from the grill before serving.”

After cooking, she added, be sure to keep the food hot until it is served – at least 140 degrees — otherwise, eat or refrigerate it right away.

“Keep food covered and never let it sit out for more than two hours, and if the weather is 90 degrees or hotter, eat or store it within one hour,” she said. “We usually say, ‘More than two is bad for you,’ but when it’s this hot outside, that should be just one hour.”

Anding said more information on outdoor cooking safety is available by contacting the local county AgriLife Extension agent for family and consumer sciences or reading the U.S. Department of Agriculture fact sheet on safe food handling online at [Food_Safety/" target="_blank">www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/ ... 578f76098dca_Safety/](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Fact_Sheet/578f76098dca_Safety/) .

Provided by Texas A&M AgriLife

Citation: Experts: Outdoor cooking, food safety important for July 4 celebrations (2012, July 2) retrieved 10 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-07-experts-outdoor-cooking-food-safety.html>

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