

Food-Borne Illness

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American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Nov. 13, 2000 -- Picture it, the perfect Thanksgiving. You've eaten your fill; the dishes are done; football is on the tube.

Then just as you're starting to think about a turkey sandwich -- it strikes. You feel a rumbling deep in your belly, maybe a little queasiness. Next thing you know, you're running for the bathroom.

Chances are you've just fallen victim to a tiny invader -- any one of 250 different bacteria that can inhabit food and cause illness if the food's not handled properly.

Atlanta's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate food-borne illnesses strike 76 million people each year. More than 300,000 are hospitalized, and 5,000 die.

Food-borne illnesses can sicken anyone, but infants, the elderly and those with compromised immune systems are at greatest risk, according to Carlla E. Jones, a health promotion program analyst with the Army's Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine at Fort Detrick, Md.

The two most common symptoms are vomiting and diarrhea, Jones said. Stomach cramps, fever, muscle pain and headaches are also possible.

Illness-causing bacteria thrive in certain environments, particularly moist surfaces between 40 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit, Jones said. She said bacteria breeds in raw or processed meat, poultry and seafood, and dairy and egg products.

"Keep in mind, however, that even safe, ready-to-eat foods can become cross contaminated with bacteria transferred from raw food products, meat juices, food preparation equipment or as a result of poor personal hygiene," Jones said.

She shared the following tips for preventing food-borne illnesses.

- Wash hands and surfaces often. Wash hands in hot soapy water before preparing food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers and handling pets.
- Wash cutting boards, utensils and counter tops in hot soapy water after preparing each food item and before going on to the next one.
- Wash dish towels often in the hot cycle of the washing machine.
- Don't cross-contaminate. Separate raw meat, poultry, and seafood from other food in the grocery cart.
- Store raw meat, poultry and seafood on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so juices cannot contaminate other foods.
- Use a separate cutting board, if possible, for raw meat products.
- Never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw meat, poultry or seafood.
- Cook to proper temperature. Use a meat thermometer to make sure meat and poultry are cooked all the way through. Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm, not runny.
- When cooking in a microwave oven, make sure there are no cold spots in food. Cover food, stir and rotate for even cooking.
- Bring sauces, soups and gravy to a full boil when reheating.
- Refrigerate promptly. Pick up refrigerated and frozen foods last at the grocery store.
- Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared food and leftovers within two hours.
- Never defrost or marinate food on the kitchen counter.

- Don't pack the refrigerator. Cool air must circulate to keep food safe.
- Divide large quantities of hot foods into several small containers before refrigerating.

And last but not least: when in doubt, throw it out. “If you are unsure if food has been prepared, served or stored safely, just throw it out. Food can look and smell fine, but it may not be safe to eat,” Jones said. “Following sound food safety procedures will help to protect yourself and your family from food-borne illnesses.”

For more information on food safety, Jones recommended the following web sites:

<http://www.fightbac.org>

<http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines>

<http://www.cdc.gov/health/foodill.htm>

<http://www.foodsafety.gov/>