

Debbie's Story – How You Handle Food Matters

For me, a community like Suppers is about feeling included. Don't we all want to belong to something larger than ourselves? I am a nutrition educator and a trained food sanitation safety expert. Food safety is just as important to me as nutrition itself. One group I don't want to join, however, is the reported 76 million Americans who have cases of food-borne illness each year, from stomach ache, cramps, vomiting and diarrhea resulting in dehydration, or in extreme cases, kidney failure or even death.

It is important to always keep an eye open for circumstances that ruin the food you prepare and eat. Avoiding food-borne disease is not always possible, but knowledge, common sense, and diligence can help you avoid potentially disastrous consequences. How you handle food matters. Every food has food-borne illness potential. With enough time, warmth, moisture and nutrients, one bacterium that divides every half hour can produce 17 million progeny in 12 hours! Nowhere is it truer that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" than in food handling. If you get it wrong, people get sick.

It's important to take control of the preparation of your own food. It gives you a measure of quality control in your kitchen. You will also have reliable knowledge of what has been added to the food you eat. Food contamination usually occurs when food is produced, stored, or mishandled and pathogens proliferate due to time, temperature, and unsanitary conditions. Dangerous food pathogens can be odorless, flavorless, and undetectable to the eye. But basic awareness of the factors contributing to food-borne illness can substantially reduce the risk of getting one. In simple terms, if you think about putting a dirty pair of shoes on your countertop, that's the same thing as you are doing when you put your purse on the kitchen table or countertop. Pathogens hitch a ride in many ways and on many articles. There is a lot more to protecting home plate than good hand washing!

Safe food begins at the place of purchase, so it should be free of odors and filth. Using reusable shopping bags needs to be viewed the same as using a clean cutting board. It is a preliminary means of avoiding cross-contamination. The bags need to be used for foods only. Meat should be encased in a second plastic bag to prevent the leakage of bacteria. And bags need to be washed and air-dried between uses. Ideally, use separate, labeled bags for meat and produce as you do for cutting boards. Improperly handled raw foods are the most common source of food-borne pathogens, because they are not sterile. Contamination can occur during the growing, harvesting, processing, storing, shipping, or final preparation.

If you went into a food establishment and saw a dirty, disorganized, messy kitchen and dining area, you might have second thoughts and want to walk out the door. Feeling nauseated at signs of poor hygiene is nature's way of helping us avoid things that would make us sick. So the same should be true for your home kitchen. A deep cleaning strategy needs to prevail and requires some tough choices.

Debbie's Guidelines for a Healthy Kitchen

- * Put foods away in the refrigerator or freezer. It stops most bacteria from growing.
- * Wash hands, utensils, and cutting boards after they have been in contact with raw meat or poultry and before they touch another food. This will minimize food-borne pathogen contamination.
- * Wash all produce. Rinse fresh fruits and vegetables with a vegetable brush under running tap water to remove visible dirt and grime.

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- * For extra protection, mix one part vinegar or lemon juice to three parts water (so three cups of water to one cup of vinegar or lemon juice). Keep this in a spray bottle and use it as a rinse to coat the surface of the produce. Then it can be rinsed again to remove the acid wash, which diminishes the growth of surface bacteria. It is important to rinse produce even if you are going to peel it. Most bacteria on vegetables with many crevices can be removed just by soaking for two minutes. Bacteria can grow successfully on the cut surface of any produce, so be careful not to spread contamination while slicing them up on the cutting board.
- * Avoid leaving cut up foods at room temperature for many hours.
- * Have thermometers in your refrigerator so there is no doubt about proper temperature control of the appliance.
- * Use food probe thermometers for monitoring the cooling and heating of the foods you have prepared. The rules for chilling and cooling food are to attain 40F degrees or under in two hours, with the container having no deeper a food layer than two inches. These food containers should be covered.
- * Keep hot foods at a constant temperature of 140 F.
- * Don't be the source of food borne illness yourself. Wash your hands with soap and water before preparation for a minimum of 20 seconds, and repeatedly throughout the process of preparing. Some produce must be thoroughly washed and air dried before it can be cut; like melons, squash and cucumbers, because there is the potential of E coli bacterium growth due to soil exposure and possible contaminated water sources from where it was grown.
- * To the extent possible, know where your food is grown. Locally grown foods have the advantage of spending less time in transit with all the extra handling, temperature changes and opportunities for contamination.
- * Disinfect cutting boards with two tablespoons of bleach in a gallon of water. Cutting boards should be able to fit flat inside the kitchen sink basin, so they can be soaked in this solution for a minimum of three minutes. And then they can be rinsed and air-dried. (There are other means to disinfect surfaces by using vinegar solutions or hydrogen peroxide. It simply depends on informed choices.)
- * Dishwashers are another means to sanitize cutting boards. Bacteria will continue to grow in dark warm spaces, so provide space between each board while storing for proper airflow.
- * Some of the most important items to keep sanitized in order to maintain food safety are the sponge or dish cloths used to clean up and wipe surfaces. Bacteria are always present on these cleaning items. The best way to non-chemically sanitize your sponge is to float the sponge in a microwave safe bowl filled with two to three inches of water. Microwave the bowl for a minimum of four minutes. Proper heat is required to kill spores. Let the bowl and sponge cool to the touch and then resume using.
- * Let sponges dry well between uses and toss them in the garbage after three weeks. Dish towels and cleaning rags should be changed frequently throughout the food preparation day, yes, several times a day. Bacteria just love moist cloths.

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Most of these actions take just seconds. Once you form the habits, it becomes quick and easy. They say most of your immune system is in your digestive tract. But why risk stomach aches, diarrhea, and infections when it's so easy to avoid pathogens to begin with? Improving immunity can start right at the kitchen sink!