

Be food safe and avoid food-borne illness

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Have you ever gobbled a glob of cookie dough when no one was looking? Thawed a frozen steak on the kitchen counter? Eaten an orange without washing it? Chopped veggies on the same unwashed cutting board that you'd just used to cut raw chicken?

If you answered yes to any of the above, it's time to refresh your knowledge of food safety. When it comes to safe food handling, many of us slip up once in a while.

Learning the rules of food safety is as important as learning the rules of the road.



Foodborne illness, which comes from consuming contaminated foods or beverages, can cause serious illness or even death. The

Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention estimates there are more than 76 million cases of food-borne illness each year in the United States, resulting in 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths. Many of those illnesses and deaths are the result of food-handling errors made by consumers and are preventable.

Mean and clean

To be clean, you gotta be mean — to bacteria, that is. Germs hate soap, so wash your hands and work surfaces often while preparing food.

"Lack of handwashing is the most common mistake people make regarding safe food handling," says Richard A. Raymond, MD, undersecretary for food safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Wash hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before and after handling food."

Bacteria lurk on work surfaces, too. Wash kitchen counters and cutting boards with hot, soapy water and repeat the process every time you move on to a different food item. Dish towels can spread bacteria, too, so consider using paper towels instead.

Divide and conquer

Think of the bacteria that cause food-borne illness as unwanted guests who will go away if kept apart. Separating foods helps prevent cross-contamination, or the spread of bacteria from raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs to



>> For more food safety tips, visit www.befoodsafe.gov or www.cdc.gov

not one of them. Your refrigerator is the safest place to defrost foods, but in today's fast-paced world, many of us can't plan a day or two ahead, so what to do?

"You can thaw foods in the microwave or in cold water if you're going to use them right away," says Howard Seltzer, national education advisor at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

If using the cold water method, keep the meat and poultry in an airtight package and change the water every 30 minutes. Never defrost your meat in hot water!



other foods or surfaces. At the grocery store, place raw meats in individual plastic bags and tuck them in a corner of your shopping cart so that their juices won't drip on other foods. Separate them in your refrigerator, too. And separate your cutting boards. Designate a special one to use only for cutting raw meat, poultry, fish and eggs, and wash it with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item.

Polish your peels

Food safety isn't just about meat, poultry, fish and eggs. Fruits and vegetables are also breeding grounds for bacteria, even if they appear squeaky clean on the produce shelf at the grocery store. You should thoroughly rinse all fresh produce under running tap water — no need to use soap — including oranges, as even fruits with inedible peels and rinds can be risky.



Slicing through an orange, for example, can transport the germs on the skin into the part you eat. Also, bacteria thrive in the bruised parts of produce, so cut out the damaged areas, or when in doubt, throw it out.

Give 'em the cold shoulder

There are only three safe ways to defrost foods, and defrosting at room temperature is

Create a happy ending

Whether you're 8 or 80, cookie dough is hard to resist, but the raw egg in it can lead to salmonella poisoning. Aware of the problem, the American Dietetic Association has created a handy "Cookie Rookie Certificate of Achievement" that makes you pledge to stay off the sticky stuff. Download it at www.homefoodsafety.org/pages/kids/index.jsp, and hang it on the fridge. It might come in handy during your next baking project.

Turn up the heat

Food doesn't have to look weird or smell funny to be crawling with contaminants, so always cook meat, poultry, seafood and egg dishes to a safe temperature. But the only way to know for sure if your food is properly cooked is to use a food thermometer, available for just a few bucks at most grocery stores.

To make sure your food is cooked to a safe temperature, consult the handy chart online at www.befoodsafe.org/temperature.html. Print it out and post it in your kitchen so you'll be ready the next time you sear a steak or fry a fish.

