



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

Safe Summer Food Hot Off the Grill

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The sweet scents of outdoor grilling are floating through our Arkansas neighborhoods. There's something about secret sauces mixed with the smoky aroma of sizzling meats and vegetables that you just can't beat. Not surprisingly, during the summer season, more people cook outdoors than any other time of the year. Whether camping, picnicking or preparing meals at home, you should follow some simple guidelines to keeping your food safe.

Grilling and smoking are two of the favored methods of cooking during the summertime. Grilling is cooking food over direct heat. Smoking is cooking food indirectly in the presence of a fire. Smoking cooks the food more slowly than grilling, thus, allowing the natural smoke flavor to permeate the meat.

Foods purchased for grilling and smoking should be handled with food safety in mind. Meat and poultry products should be selected for purchase during the last part of the shopping trip. Remember, raw meat and poultry products should be placed in separate plastic bags to prevent cross contamination. Cross contamination can happen when raw meat or poultry juices drip onto ready-to-eat foods, fruits and vegetables.

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When preparing to grill or smoke foods, always marinate foods in the refrigerator, not on the kitchen counter at room temperature. Do not reuse the marinade from raw meat or poultry to baste the food during cooking or as a sauce on the cooked product. It's best to initially reserve a portion of the marinade for this purpose if the recipe indicates the need for basting or the addition of sauce.

Cross contamination during preparation, grilling or smoking and serving is a prime cause of food borne illness. To avoid cross contamination, the following food safety tips are recommended:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before and after handling food.
- Store raw meat, poultry and seafood on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so juices don't drip onto other foods.
- If possible, use one cutting board for raw meat products and another for salads and other foods that are ready to be eaten.
- Always wash cutting boards, knives and other utensils with hot, soapy water after they come in contact with raw meat, poultry and seafood.
- Never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw meat, poultry or seafood.

Cooking times may vary depending on outdoor temperature, the size and thickness of the meat and the type of grill and/or coals that are used. A probe thermometer should be used to assure that the food has reached a safe internal temperature. The thermometer should be used to check the temperature of the innermost, or thickest, portion of the meat to insure proper cooking.

Foods should be cooked to the following temperatures: poultry to 165° F; ground beef to 160° F; pork to 150° F; and all other potentially hazardous foods to 140° F. Never partially grill meat or poultry and

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finish cooking later. Cook food completely to destroy harmful bacteria.

After cooking, keep food hot at 140° F until served. When outdoors, place the cooked meats to one side of the grill rack. Be careful to place these foods on an area of the grill that is not directly over the coals to prevent overcooking. At home, cooked meats may be kept in a 200° F oven, chafing dish, slow cooker or a warming tray.

Leftovers should be immediately refrigerated or placed on ice to bring the temperature down to 45° F or less within two hours. Cut large portions of meat into smaller pieces to speed the cooling process. When reheating grilled or smoked foods, as well as fully cooked meats such as hot dogs, grill or reheat to 165° F or until steaming hot.

When grilling and smoking foods, safety comes first. For more information on preparing and serving safe food products, call your local health unit or contact the Arkansas Department of Health Food Protection Services at (501) 661-2171. You may also want to visit the Gateway to Government Food Safety Information web site, www.foodsafety.gov.

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