

Take Precautions, Food Poisoning Can be a Real Buzz Kill

by John Rizzo

How many times have you heard this: “When I was young, we left food out all day in the sun and nobody ever got sick”? Well that might just be true; but times have changed big time. With a global food market, there is never a guarantee that the food coming from outside the United States is regulated as well as the food grown or processed here. We never heard about dangerous bacteria grown in lettuce, tomatoes, spinach or any other fruit or vegetable. This is no longer the case; salmonella and E-coli often associated with protein sources, have been found in a variety of fruits and vegetables as of late.

So how can we be sure that what we are serving is safe? Although there is always some risk regardless of the food source, it doesn't have to be a perilous adventure every time we feed our families. First and foremost, thorough hand washing is critical. Most viral foodborne illness, such as the norovirus and Hepatitis A are almost always spread through poor hygiene or contaminated water.

Bacteria that cause foodborne illness, such as salmonella, E-coli, Listeria, and staph to name a few, can be easily remedied by following simple safe food handling techniques.

1. **Hold foods at safe temperatures.** Keep food out of the danger zone (41° F to 135 ° F). This presents the perfect temperature zone for bacteria to rapidly multiply. Keep it cold or keep it hot.
2. **Cook food to the proper internal temperature:** Most bacteria can be killed during the cooking process.
 - A) **145 ° F minimum cooking temperature:** Shell eggs, pork and fish, beef steak, veal, and lamb
 - B) **155° F minimum cooking temperature:** ground beef
 - C) **165° F minimum cooking temperature:** Poultry and stuffed meats, reheating of leftovers
3. **Contaminated Equipment and work areas (cross contamination):** Improperly cleaned or sanitized work equipment, such as cutting boards and knives, is a common culprit for spreading unsafe bacteria from food to food. Especially when one of the food items is something that requires no further cooking, i.e. lettuce, bread, etc.
4. **Good Personal Hygiene:** Wash your hands as you change tasks. This includes handling garbage, physical contact with another person or personal belongings, using the bathroom and coughing or sneezing. And never prepare food for others when you're sick.

Next month I'll discuss some common myths and misconceptions as well as additional facts and tips to keep food safe. Until then, the following recipe is a nice variation to the traditional mayonnaise based potato salad

Mediterranean Potato Salad

Yield: 8

(This salad is best when made one day ahead: all the flavors will blend together and the onions will soften.)

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| Large Russet Potatoes | 4 | Crumbled Feta Cheese | 1/2 Cup |
| Cucumber, diced 1/2 in | 1 Cup | Italian Dressing | 1/2 Cup |
| Red Peppers, diced 1/4 in | 1/4 Cup | Lemon Juice | 1 TBL |
| Green Peppers, diced 1/4 in | 1/4 Cup | Chopped Fresh Parsley | 1 TBL |
| Sweet Onion, thinly sliced | 1/4 Cup | Salt and Pepper to taste | |

Peel and boil the potatoes until tender on the inside. Let them cool completely; then remove the skin and dice into half inch cubes. Blanch the red and green peppers in boiling water until slightly softened; strain and run under cold water to stop the cooking process. (Roasted red peppers can be substituted for fresh -no cooking required.)

In a large mixing bowl, combine the Italian dressing, lemon juice, and parsley; mix well. Add all remaining ingredients and gently blend together. Refrigerate until ready to serve.