Handling Holiday Leftovers Safely

By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

During the holidays, many people who get an upset stomach figure it is caused by the flu or a stomach bug. But some of this may be attributed to food borne illness, which has similar symptoms, and is preventable!

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that about 76 million people get sick from food borne illness each year, with 5000 of those cases being fatal. The Economic Research Service of the USDA estimates the cost of illness and death caused by just five of the common food borne pathogens (campylobacter, Salmonella, Listeria monocytogenes, E. coli O157:H7 and E. coli non-O157:H7 STEC) to be $6.9 billion annually.

Handling leftovers safely is one way to prevent food borne illness.

Like other microorganisms, ones that can cause illness thrive in temperatures between 40 degrees Fahrenheit (refrigerator temperature) and 140°F (steaming). Two little potential disease-causing bacteria on a food item could become 512 strong in just 2 hours at room temperature! A small amount, like two microorganisms, might be fought off by a person’s immune system, but the larger the colony, the harder to fight them off and win.

If leftovers are expected, go ahead and store them even before serving the meal. Store them in small, shallow, airtight containers. Place them in the fridge immediately – refrigerators are designed to cool food quickly. Hot food left in larger, deeper containers can take a long time to cool. Imagine putting the whole pot of spaghetti sauce or chili in the fridge at once and coming back in two hours – if you scooped a bowlful out of the middle of the pot, it would still be pretty hot. On the other hand, if it had been put in small shallow containers, the cold air circulating around the containers will cool all of it more quickly. Again, the longer food remains warm, the greater the growth of potentially harmful bacteria.

Put all leftovers away promptly. If more guests are expected later, or if leftovers will be used for a meal or snack later that day, cool them quickly and reheat to 165°F just before eating.

Protect your family and guests this holiday and anytime by handling leftovers safely.

For more information on keeping the holidays healthy by handling leftovers safely or any other topic, contact me, Janet Hackert, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.

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