

Keep Kitchen Clean for a Healthier Holiday

By Janet Hackert, Nutrition Specialist

Many people gather in the kitchen to share holiday cheer. Keeping the kitchen clean during the holidays and throughout the year can help keep it a healthier place too. Sponges and dish clothes, countertops and the sink are great areas to target.

Microorganisms that cause food-borne illness thrive in a moist, warm environment, making sponges and dish clothes ideal breeding grounds. Sponges provide lots of surface area for bacteria to grow on. In a study done by NSF International, 77% of sponges and dish clothes harbored coliform bacteria, indicating fecal contamination, and 18% had Staphylococcus bacteria. These cleaning utensils are used for cleaning up such things as raw meat juices and dirt from articles placed on counters, and so themselves become contaminated.

To clean sponges, place in the microwave and heat for a full minute on high power. Be sure the sponge is wet to avoid setting it on fire. Washing them in the hot or sanitize cycle of a dishwasher is also effective in killing germs living in them. Do this daily to keep contamination at bay. For dish clothes, get a clean one each day and wash used ones in the hottest cycle of the washing machine to clean them.

Countertops are another major area of concern. They are touched by dirty hands that have unwittingly touched contaminated surfaces, and they are wiped with dirty sponges or dish cloths. According to Joseph Frank of the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety, "Cleaning your kitchen surfaces with soap and water is enough for most normal healthy people." This cleaning removes 99% of the disease-causing germs. For homes where people at higher risk for food-borne illness live or visit, disinfecting after cleaning is recommended. The USDA says to use one tablespoon of unscented bleach per gallon of water and mix well. Flood the countertop with the mixture, let stand for a few minutes and pat dry with clean, dry paper towels, or let air dry. Disinfectant wipes or sprays can also be used but only after cleaning the surface first. These also require letting them stand for some time for the disinfectant to do its job. Then the surface should be wiped clean of the residue, since these chemicals are not food safe.

Sinks are another opportunity for growing harmful bacteria. This is especially true when a sink is used for working with meat, like thawing a turkey in cold water that is changed every 30 minutes. Listeria, Salmonella, and other disease-causing are caught, held, and multiply in the drain and disposal. Dr. Frank also suggests disinfecting this area with the same bleach water solution when immunocompromised people eat in the house. (Those at higher risk include very young children, older adults, and anyone with a disease that leaves their immune system weakened.)

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