Food Safety Is Especially Important For Seniors

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The Centers for Disease Control estimates that there are 76 million foodborne illnesses in the United States each year. Senior citizens need to know they are at increased risk for contracting a foodborne illness. The good news is they can decrease their risk by avoiding some foods and taking steps to keep other foods safe.

Everyone’s health is different but generally, the immune system weakens as we age increasing the risk for all types of illness including foodborne illness. Additionally, seniors often fail to drink enough fluids which can cause dehydration and increases the risk for illness.

When we suffer from a foodborne infection, bacteria has survived the process of going through the stomach and has made it to the small intestine where it grows and eventually makes us sick. Stomach acid helps protect us by destroying harmful bacteria. As we age, stomach acid decreases making it much easier for bacteria to make it to the small intestine.

Major surgeries and some chronic diseases such as diabetes, some forms of cancer and kidney disease can increase a person’s risk for illness.

As we age, our sense of smell, taste and sight can decline. All of these things can have an impact on nutritional status. If nutritional status is compromised, immunity can be decreased.

The best way to prevent a foodborne illness is to handle and store food properly:

- Wash your hands often. Keeping germs off your hands helps to prevent them from getting on food.

- Always cook food, especially meat, until it is done. The best way to know if a meat is safe is if it is cooked to a proper temperature. You can use a meat thermometer to make sure that meat is cooked thoroughly.

- Make sure to thaw and store foods properly. Meat should be thawed in the refrigerator.

- When serving leftovers, the food should be thoroughly re-heated.

- Once the meal is over, food should be promptly stored in the refrigerator. A food should never sit at room temperature longer than two hours.

There are some foods that seniors should not eat because of a higher risk for illness. They include raw or unpasteurized milk or cheese made from raw milk; soft cheeses such as brie, feta, camembert, blue-veined cheeses and Mexican-style cheese; raw or lightly cooked eggs; raw or undercooked meat, poultry or fish; raw sprouted seeds and unpasteurized or untreated juice.

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