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Clean, Separate, Cook and Chill!

The FightBac.org websites states to Clean, Separate, Cook and Chill our foods. These four words are packed with meaning when preparing foods for your family and friends. Food safety is a topic we hear a lot about. But until we know someone who becomes ill we really don’t think it will happen to us.

As a Nutrition and Health Education Specialist for MU Extension I receive a lot of calls about foods. Most callers are concerned about the safety of the food. Let’s focus on our refrigerator and the “Chill” or temperature of our food storage.

After we have prepared and served a dish to our family any remaining food or leftovers, must be stored properly to prevent bacterial growth. Such bacterial growth can cause infections and illnesses when consumed. These illnesses are known as foodborne illness.

According to the National Restaurant Association, Foodborne illness causes flu like symptoms and can be especially serious for those with underdeveloped immune systems or compromised immune systems such as children and the elderly or those with chronic conditions.

Now that we know what an illness is we can lessen the likelihood of becoming ill by storing foods properly. According to FightBac.org we need to keep cold foods cold and store leftovers as soon after a meal as possible.

Leftovers should be stored in shallow airtight packages or containers that are moisture and vapor proof. Place containers in the refrigerator on different shelves so food cools quickly. Ready to eat foods should be stored above raw meats and seafood.

Leftovers should be used within three to four days as a general rule. Some foods like gravies and ground meats should be used in one or two days. Do not depend on how a food looks, smells, or tastes to indicate if it is safe to eat.
A close personal friend ate some three day old leftovers and was very ill for several days. A good rule of thumb is: “When in Doubt, Throw it Out!” Why take a risk in becoming ill?

Let’s focus on our refrigerator for a moment. When storing food in the refrigerator we assume it is safe going in and safe coming out. But could putting it in the frig introduce bacteria?

When was the last time you cleaned the frig? We store foods in packages from the store which have been handled by many people. Spilled or spoiled foods may be in the refrigerator right now. All of these situations could allow bacteria and pathogens to contaminate other foods in our refrigerators.

When it comes to your refrigerator/freezer take a few preventative measures.
- Clean spill when they happen. It is much easier to do when fresh than a week or even a day later.
- Wash the outside of packages that are soiled.
- Use clean air tight and moisture proof containers to store foods.
- Clean your refrigerator on a regular basis.
- Wipe condiment containers off after use and/or before placing in the frig.
- Store ready to eat foods above uncooked meats.
- Maintain a temperature of 40°F or below in the frig and 0°F or below in the freezer.
- Throw out unused leftovers after a few days.

According to Share Our Strength’s Cooking Matters for Adults Leader Guide, a simple bleach solution could be used to wipe shelves and door handles. Mix ¼ teaspoon bleach with two cups of water in a spray bottle. Store in a cool, dry place for no more than one month. Wear rubber gloves when using the bleach solution. The bleach solution could also be used to sanitize countertops and cutting boards.

Remember when you finish your meal and have foods left over:
- Store in airtight containers or packaging.
- Place in the refrigerator or freezer promptly.
- Keep your refrigerator at 40°F or below.
- Freezer temperatures should be at 0°F or below.
- Use within three to four days depending on the food.

Some bacteria such as, Listeria monocytogenes can grow at refrigerator temperatures. FightBac.org states, “Listeriosis has the second highest fatality rate among all infections caused by foodborne pathogens.” Utilize these tips and remember When in Doubt, Throw it Out.

Useful websites with information about food safety include:
Missourifamilies.org  Extension.missouri.edu
Fightback.org  Servsafe.com
Foodsafety.gov  Strength.org
CDC.gov
If you have personal questions about food safety or would like more information about food safety, nutrition or any other health related topics please visit www.extension.missouri.edu, stop in or contact me at the Missouri Extension Service Center in Cass County - 816-380-8460. I would be glad to help you have a healthier and food safe life.

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