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FOOD SAFETY FOR PICNIC SEASON

It may be hard to believe, but May is already upon us! Memorial Day is coming up later this month and summer will follow shortly after that. As the weather warms, this is a time of year when we gather together with friends and family for picnics, potlucks, and fun. And these get togethers almost always involve sharing food. Which is great, because we love to share traditional family foods and newly discovered recipes with those closest to us. In doing so, we want to make sure we are also keeping friends and family safe from foodborne illness!

The Centers for Disease Control estimate that 48 million people get sick each year as a result of foodborne illnesses. These illnesses can even get so severe that people might end up in the hospital or die as a result. Some people are particularly vulnerable as well, especially children, the elderly, and those who are immune compromised. Even the mildest foodborne illness can cause some pretty uncomfortable symptoms, so it makes sense that we would want to protect those around us from feeling this way. We will talk a little bit more about exactly why, but picnics and potlucks can create situations where foodborne illness is more likely. The good news is that there are some simple things we can do to reduce the risk of foodborne illness and protect those around us! So, here are some simple tips to make sure foodborne illness isn't invited to your upcoming get together!

Let's start with thinking about how our food is prepared. In food safety, we frequently use the term "cross contamination." This basically means letting food items touch, using the same cooking tool on more than one item, or somehow getting some of one type of food onto a different food. Here is a good example: You are in your kitchen preparing some chicken. You slice it into chunks on a cutting board. Then, you leave the knife and cutting board on the counter. A few minutes later, you (or someone else) use that same knife and cutting board to chop vegetables for a salad. Now, any bacteria that was on the chicken is likely on the vegetables in the salad. So, our first key is to make sure that you clean surfaces, kitchen tools, and your hands whenever you are working with different foods or moving between different tasks in the kitchen.

Next, let's consider a different situation, one that is pretty common in my family! My mom is allergic to shellfish, so we make sure to ask before eating whether any of the dishes have shellfish in them so that we know which dishes my mom should avoid. Sometimes, people know

they did not use shellfish in their dish. But other times, people can't say for sure, so mom has to skip that particular dish. Allergies are very common and knowing the ingredients of your dish can help make sure people don't end up accidentally eating something they are allergic to. If you have time, you could even write up a list of ingredients to put with your dish so that people know exactly what is in each of the dishes at the party.

Finally, we want to make sure we are paying attention to the food temperature. In food safety, we often talk about the temperature danger zone. The temperature danger zone is between 40 degrees Fahrenheit and 140 degrees Fahrenheit. This means that the micro-organisms that cause foodborne illness grow best when the temperature is between 40 and 140 degrees Fahrenheit. The best thing we can do is make sure that hot foods stay hot (above 140) and cold foods stay cold (below 40). If there is electric available at your picnic, you can use a slow cooker or some other device to make sure that the hot food stays hot. For colder food at picnics, we often store them in a cooler. One tip is to make sure you store cold foods separate from drinks. Since people are often going to get drinks, the cooler is opened many times, which can make it harder to stay cool. If the foods are in a separate cooler that is opened less often, they stay cooler for longer. If you are not using a cooler, you could also use two bowls nested together to keep your cold foods cool (this works best with metal or glass bowls). Pick a bowl that is larger than the one holding your dish. Then, add ice and some water to the larger bowl but do not fill it the whole way. Put the bowl holding your dish in the larger bowl full of ice. The ice water bowl should help keep the food cool. Finally, you can make sure you have a thermometer to check food temperatures. If foods are getting close to the temperature danger zone, you can put them in the fridge to get them colder or heat them up on the stove to make them warmer. Just don't forget to clean the thermometer between the different foods!

If you follow these tips, you can help protect your family and friends from foodborne illness! For more information, you can also check out these resources:

- <https://www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/handling-food-safely-while-eating-outdoors>
- <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/publications/food-nutrition/keep-food-safe-during-summer-picnics-1>

Here are some healthy recipes from University of Maryland Extension's Eat Smart program that you can try at one of your get togethers this summer!

TERRIFIC TRAIL MIX

Yield: 16 servings

5 cups of small pretzels
2 cups of whole wheat grain cereal, such as Cheerios
5 cups of air-popped popcorn
2 cups of dried fruit like raisins or dried cranberries
2 cups of sunflower seeds

Combine all ingredients in a large bowl. Enjoy!

Find this recipe at: <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/family-consumer-sciences/snap-ed/eat-smart/recipes/terrific-trail-mix>

SPRING VEGETABLE SAUTE

Yield: 6 servings

1 teaspoon olive oil
1/2 cup sweet onion, sliced
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
3 new potatoes, tiny, quartered
3/4 cup carrot, sliced
3/4 cup asparagus pieces
3/4 cup sugar snap peas, or green beans
1/2 cup radishes, quartered
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
1/2 teaspoon dill, dried

Heat oil in a skillet. Cook the onion for two minutes, add the garlic and cook another minute. Stir in the potatoes and carrots. Cover, turn the heat to low, and cook until almost tender, about four minutes. If the vegetables start to brown, add a tablespoon or two of water. Now add the asparagus, peas, radishes, salt, pepper, and dill. Cook stirring often, until just tender, about four minutes more. Serve immediately.

Find this recipe at: <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/family-consumer-sciences/snap-ed/eat-smart/recipes/spring-vegetable-saute>

SWEET POTATO AND OATMEAL CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIE BARS

Yield: 18 servings

2 sweet potatoes, peeled, cooked and mashed
3/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup vegetable oil
1/4 cup low-fat or fat-free plain yogurt
1 large egg, beaten
3/4 cup all-purpose flour
3/4 cup whole wheat flour
1 1/4 cups dry oatmeal
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1 cup semisweet mini chocolate chips or regular size chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Place sweet potato and sugar in large mixing bowl; mash until smooth. Add oil, yogurt, and egg, mix thoroughly.

SWEET POTATO AND OATMEAL CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIE BARS (continued)

Mix flours, oats, baking soda, and spices in a medium-size bowl. Add dry ingredients to sweet potato mixture and stir just enough to combine. Add chocolate chips and stir to mix.

Spray 13x9x 2” baking pan with cooking oil spray. Pour batter into pan. Bake for 25-30 minutes or until lightly brown.

Remove from oven and let cool in pan for 8-10 minutes. Cut into 18 bars.

Find this recipe at: <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/family-consumer-sciences/snap-ed/eat-smart/recipes/sweet-potato-and-oatmeal-chocolate-chip-cookie-bars>

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