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4 SIMPLE STEPS TO FOOD SAFETY, AUGUST 2004

National Food Safety Education Month is quickly approaching (September), so I am taking this opportunity to share with you important information on food safety. Although the U.S. food supply is among the safest in the world, there are organisms that you can't see, smell or taste – bacteria, viruses and tiny parasites that are everywhere in our environment. These microorganisms, called pathogens, can invade food and cause illness, sometimes severe and even life-threatening illness, especially in young children, older adults, and persons with weakened immune systems.

The most common symptoms of foodborne illness are diarrhea, abdominal cramps, vomiting, head or muscle aches, and fever. Symptoms usually appear 12 to 72 hours after eating contaminated food but may occur between 30 minutes and 4 weeks later. Most people recover within 4 to 7 days without needing antibiotic treatment. If symptoms are severe or the ill person is very young, very old, or pregnant, contact your healthcare provider right away.

When you think of foodborne illness, you may automatically think of dining out. But don't forget the importance of safe food handling at home. Food safety may seem easier if you follow 4 simple steps – clean, separate, cook and chill.

1) Clean: Wash hands and surfaces often. Bacteria, viruses and parasites can be spread throughout the kitchen and get onto cutting boards, utensils and countertops. Wash your hands with hot, soapy water before and after handling food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and handling pets. Wash your cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and countertops with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next food. Also important is to rinse raw produce in water. Don't use soap or detergents. If necessary, use a small vegetable brush to remove the surface dirt.

2) Separate: Don't cross-contaminate. Cross-contamination is the word for how bacteria, viruses and parasites can be spread from one food product to another. This is especially true when handling raw meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs, so keep these foods and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods. Separate raw meat, poultry, and seafood from other foods in your grocery shopping cart and in your refrigerator. If possible, use a different cutting board for raw meat, poultry and seafood products. Always wash hands, cutting boards, dishes, and utensils with hot, soapy water after they come in contact with raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs. Use separate plates for raw and cooked foods.

3) Cook: Cook to proper temperatures. Foods are properly cooked when they are heated for a long enough time and at a high enough temperature to kill the harmful

pathogens that cause foodborne illness. Use a clean thermometer that measures the internal temperature of cooked food to make sure meat, poultry and casseroles are cooked to the correct temperatures. Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm. If you use recipes in which eggs remain raw or only partially cooked, use pasteurized eggs. Fish should be opaque and flake easily with a fork. When cooking in a microwave oven, make sure there are no cold spots where pathogens can survive. For best results, cover food, stir, and rotate for even cooking. If there is no turntable, rotate the dish by hand once or twice during cooking. Bring sauces, soups and gravy to a boil when reheating,

4) Chill: Refrigerate promptly. Refrigerate foods quickly because cold temperatures keep harmful pathogens from growing and multiplying. So, set your refrigerator no higher than 40 degrees F and the freezer at 0 degrees F. Check the temperatures occasionally with an appliance thermometer. Also – refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared foods, and leftovers within two hours or sooner. Never defrost at room temperature. Thaw food in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or in the microwave. Marinate foods in the refrigerator. Divide large amounts of leftovers into shallow containers for quick cooling in the refrigerator. Don't pack the refrigerator. Cool air must circulate to keep food safe.

Remember the four simple steps – clean, separate, cook and chill. To learn more about food safety, or for a safe cooking temperature chart visit www.fightbac.org or contact the Lee County Health Department at 284-3371.

-Submitted by Cathy Ferguson, MPH, Public Health Administrator