Food Safety in Outdoor Settings

September is here and with it comes the fall sports craze! South Carolina will be buzzing with football games, cross country races, soccer games, tennis matches and many more sporting events. The one thing all of these sports have in common is food. Sports fans love to tailgate and picnic and athletes need extra nutrition during matches and games. Tailgating before college games draws thousands of people in the fall but high school, recreation department and little league sports commonly include tailgates, team dinners, picnics and snacks as part of their events.

Preparing and serving foods for a crowd requires careful attention and planning. Keeping foods from becoming contaminated with foodborne pathogens can be challenging in an outdoor setting especially in the very warm temperatures of September. A few conditions that can be especially problematic when serving food outdoors are:

**Cross contamination** – It can be tricky to keep raw meats separated from other foods when working outside of the normal kitchen environment. Uncooked meat, poultry and seafood can contain unsafe bacteria. Cooking them to the correct internal temperature will kill the bacteria but if bacteria are transferred to other foods before cooking those foods can become contaminated with the unsafe bacteria. For example, if a meat product that has bacteria on it shares a cutting board with lettuce then the lettuce may become contaminated with the bacteria. Because the lettuce will not be cooked there is no opportunity for the bacteria to be eliminated. In this case, anyone eating the lettuce will be susceptible to foodborne illness.

**Temperature control** – Keeping foods from becoming contaminated with foodborne pathogens requires that hot foods be kept hot and cold foods must be kept cold. The danger zone for food temperatures is 70 °F - 140 °F. In this temperature range bacteria, that are present all around us, can quickly multiply to levels that can cause sickness. In September, high temperatures in most parts of South Carolina rise to 80 °F and above so keeping foods at the appropriate temperature requires extra planning.

**Unclean work surfaces and utensils** – Bacteria are present everywhere so surfaces and utensils should be thoroughly cleaned. Hands should be washed before handling food. Hand washing facilities may not be convenient but anyone handling food for a crowd should thoroughly wash their hands before handling food.

Ultimately, planning, preparing and serving food to a crowd should be taken seriously. No one wants to be responsible for getting a group of people sick. But “never fear”, the following guidelines from The Home & Garden Information Center, Fact Sheet HGIC 3602, Safe Picnics will give you confidence to be sure that the food you are serving will be safe.

- Try to plan just the right amount of foods to take. That way, you will not have to worry about the storage or safety of leftovers.
- Clean preparation is essential. Wash hands and work areas; be sure all utensils are clean before preparing food.
- Foods to be cooked ahead should be cooked in plenty of time to chill them thoroughly in the refrigerator. Use an insulated cooler with sufficient ice or ice packs to keep the food at 40 °F. Pack food from the refrigerator right into the cooler.
- If you are planning on take-out foods such as fried chicken or barbecued beef, eat them within two hours of pick-up or buy ahead of
time and chill before packing the foods into the cooler.
• Overwrap raw meat packages, or place in plastic bags and pack in a cooler separately from ready-to-eat foods to prevent cross-contamination.
• In warm weather, do not put cooler in the trunk; carry it inside the air-conditioned car.
• At the picnic, keep the cooler in the shade. Keep the lid closed and avoid repeated openings. Replenish the ice if it melts.
• Use a separate cooler for drinks so the one containing perishable food will not be constantly opened and closed.
• Except when it is being served, the food should be stored in a cooler.
• When handling raw meat, remove from the cooler only the amount that will fit on the grill. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends against eating raw or undercooked ground beef since harmful bacteria could be present.
• To be sure bacteria are destroyed, cook hamburgers and ribs to 160 °F (medium doneness). Cook all poultry to 165 °F. Reheat pre-cooked meats until steaming hot.
• Do not partially grill extra hamburgers to use later. Once you begin cooking hamburgers by any method, cook them until completely done to assure that bacteria are destroyed.
• When taking foods off the grill, put them on a clean plate to avoid cross-contamination. Do not put the cooked items on the same platter that held the raw meat.
• Place leftover foods in the cooler promptly after serving. Any food left outside for more than an hour should be discarded. If there is still ice in the cooler when you get home, the leftovers are okay to eat.

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