Food Safety Best Before Lunchtime

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

What did you bring for lunch today? And where have you stored your lunch until it's time to eat it?

If it's a salmon sandwich with a creamy homemade dressing, let's hope it's freshly made and kept cold. If it's a container of leftover meat and pasta, it had better not be sitting in your warm truck cab until your lunch break.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

There are a number of good reasons for following food safety guidelines. They include hepatitis A, campylobacter, salmonellosis, botulism, Norwalk, E. coli, Yersiniosis and Listeria. These foodborne illnesses are caused variously by bacteria, viruses, molds or parasites.

Another list of good reasons for safe food handling is as follows: discomfort, pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, cramps, dehydration, weight loss, fever and death.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

To prevent food-related illnesses, you have to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. This advice is even more important in warm summer weather, when foods at room temperature can spoil even more rapidly.

Cleanliness is also vital to food safety. Washing your hands and cleaning food preparation surfaces, containers and utensils can also stop the spread of foodborne diseases.

Temperature determines how quickly foodborne pathogens will grow.

The danger zone is between 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius) and 140 degrees Fahrenheit (60 degrees Celsius). In this temperature range, bacteria grow rapidly. Do not eat food that has been left at room temperature for more than two hours. With warmer summer temperatures, the limit is one hour.

You can keep lunch foods cold in an insulated kit containing a gel freezer pack. Packing a frozen gel pack or a container of juice in your lunch kit also can keep the temperature down to a safe level until you are ready to eat. Hot food such as soup can be kept hot in a preheated thermal container. If you have access to a breakroom equipped with appliances, keep your food safely cold in the refrigerator, and heat foods thoroughly in the microwave.

Do your part to keep your company’s lunchroom sanitary and prevent the spread of foodborne illness. Label and date food, you leave in the refrigerator. Get rid of outdated leftovers. Put trash in a covered container. Help keep tables, counters and other surfaces clean and dry. Don’t handle your lunch or utensils until you have washed your hands.

A safe work lunch starts when you shop for ingredients and prepare and pack them. Consider these food safety reminders:

- Shop for meats, poultry, fish and seafood last, and put them away in the refrigerator or freezer promptly when you get home. If you can’t get them home right away, keep them in a cooler in your car.
- Keep raw meats separate from other food in the grocery cart, grocery bags and refrigerators. Make sure meat does not drip onto other food.
- Wash fruits and vegetables under running water.

FINAL WORD

Keep an eye on expiration dates for all your processed food products.