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For more information, contact: Katherine Pinto
Nutrition, Food Safety and Health Agent, Wildcat Extension District
kdpinto@ksu.edu, 620-232-1930

Food Safety and Football

Is your team excited to watch the game, or is your team *excited to eat at the tailgate*? It's the time of year when football fans across the globe trade their summer picnic blankets for parking lot grills, coolers, and team spirit.

But with tailgating season underway, Kansas State University food scientist Karen Blakeslee says the game plan should include four basic food safety steps:

Wash your hands

Keeping hands clean is the first line of defense, Blakeslee said. "When you're out in a parking lot, you obviously don't have a sink, so pack a separate jug of water and put some liquid soap in it so that you can get some suds going to help remove dirt," she said.

Other options include wet wipes or soapy washcloths. Hand sanitizer can help, but only after visibly dirty hands are cleaned. "Hand sanitizer is more effective if you've washed your hands first," Blakeslee said.

Keep hot foods hot, and cold foods cold

Hot foods should be kept at a temperature of 140 degrees Fahrenheit or warmer, and cold foods at 40 F or lower. The temperatures between those two are what's known as the food safety 'danger zone.'

Blakeslee suggests slow cookers or other heating units that plug into car outlets for keeping food warm. At least, wrap warm foods in towels as you're walking out the door on the way to the party.

For cold foods, "ice chests come in very handy, and there are many options for ice chests out there now," Blakeslee said. Bring multiple ice chests to keep raw foods separated from ready-to-eat foods. Consider another cooler for drinks, to avoid having to open food coolers often.

Pack a food thermometer

Checking a particular food's internal temperature with a food thermometer is the best way to know when that food is cooked safely. Blakeslee said there are three temperatures to remember:

- 145 degrees Fahrenheit – This is the minimum internal temperature to safely prepare meats like steaks, roasts, and chops.
- 160°F – This is the minimum internal temperature to safely prepare ground meats.
- 165°F – This is the minimum internal temperature to safely prepare any kind of poultry, including ground turkey burgers.

“There's been a lot of research done at K-State about determining meat doneness by color,” Blakeslee said. “There are times when the meat's color will still look red, but it will actually be at the right temperature, and times when it looks done but it's not at the right temperature yet.”

“A food thermometer is your best friend. Take it and use it.”

Leftovers

As a rule, Blakeslee suggests trying to plan so that there are no leftovers, but if there are, most foods should not be left out for more than one hour.

“Pay attention to that time,” she said. “If it's nice, you could leave those foods out for two hours, but when it gets a lot hotter, you want to pay closer attention and get those cold foods on ice, and keep those hot foods hot.”

Before heading into the game, pack leftovers on ice.

“If you don't have enough ice left, then that hot food is just going to sit there and slowly cool down, and that's not a good thing,” Blakeslee said. “Sometimes it's best to just let it go and throw it away.”

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