

Tummy trouble

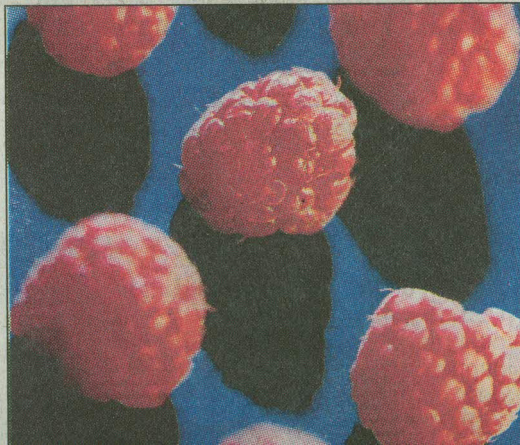
Avoid getting poisoned by perfectly good-looking food

PREVENT FOOD POISONING

- Wash your hands, utensils and food surfaces often. Wash your hands thoroughly in warm, soapy water before and after handling or preparing food, especially raw meat, poultry, fish, shellfish and eggs.
- Keep raw foods separate from ready-to-eat foods. Use separate cutting boards for raw meat and ready-to-eat foods such as breads and vegetables.
- Cook food to a safe temperature, preferably using a food thermometer. You can kill harmful organisms in most food by heating to temperatures between 140 degrees and 180 degrees.
- Refrigerate or freeze perishable food promptly. Refrigerate or freeze perishable foods within two hours of purchasing or preparing them.
- Defrost food safely, either in the refrigerator, in the microwave or in cold water.
- Avoid letting food sit out on tables after meals. When serving large quantities of food, bring out small batches at a time. Throw out leftovers that have been at room temperature for more than two hours or in hot weather for more than an



BOB FILA /Knight Ridder Tribune



Summer, when people dine and cook outside, can be riskier for food poisoning, which can come from unwashed fruits, undercooked meat or food that has been out too long. Whether it's steak tartare at an upscale cafe or a burger from your backyard grill, undercooked beef is a dangerous gamble because of the toxin-producing E-coli. Consumers must also be careful about washing fruit, such as raspberries, to avoid bacteria.

By Janie Nelson

DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

It begins with a queasy feeling in your stomach. Then, before you know it, you're doing wind sprints to the bathroom. If you think it was something you ate, you're probably right.

Approximately 76 million Americans are affected by food poisoning each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some types are more serious than others: 5,000 deaths occur annually, the CDC reports.

But, most of the everyday varieties — those that can put you down for a short time — can be prevented by following a few simple rules. And, if you do have the misfortune to come down with a common food-borne ailment and are not in an at-risk group, take comfort that in a few hours you'll be back to normal.

Watch the temperature

There are many things you can do to lower your risk of food poisoning (see accompanying box), but the Mayo Clinic Web site sums it up nicely: "Keep hot food hot. Keep cold food cold. And keep everything — especially your hands — clean."

This is especially relevant in the summer when people are firing up their grills and dining outdoors.

"Organisms grow faster in the summer months," said Dr. Ronaldo Calonje, who is in the Family Practice Residency Program at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. "Another natural thing that bacteria need is moisture. Obviously, in summer there is more moisture."

Keeping cold food, such as potato salad, on ice when you bring it to the picnic table can help reduce the chance of contamination, said Sandra Woodruff, a Tallahassee author and dietitian.

"You never want anything sitting out

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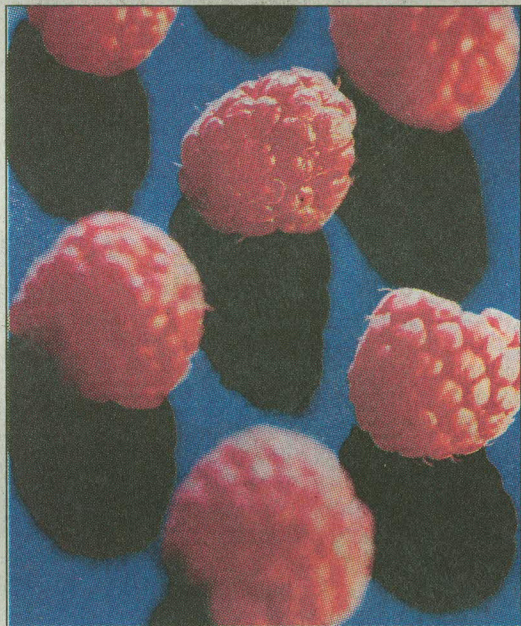
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- Throw it out when in doubt. Don't taste food that you're unsure about.

— Mayo Clinic



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Keeping cold food, such as potato salad, on ice when you bring it to the picnic table can help reduce the chance of contamination, said Sandra Woodruff, a Tallahassee author and dietitian.

"You never want anything sitting out for more than two hours," she said. "I would never leave anything out that long."

That's important, said Dr. Bob Brooks, former secretary of the Florida

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Department of Health and now associate director of health affairs at the Florida State University College of Medicine.

"The single most common event that results in food-borne outbreaks," he said, "is improper storage of food at inadequate temperatures."

The message: If that spinach dip has been sitting in the sun while the gang finishes the volleyball game, better toss it.

Cook and clean

Another danger, Brooks said, is undercooked meat, especially hamburgers. He learned that lesson through firsthand experience.

"My (then) 10-year-old daughter got *E. coli* from an undercooked hamburger at a birthday party about seven years ago," he said. She came through the ordeal without any lasting effects, Brooks said, but not without days of suffering.

"I tend to be very cautious," he said, "about hamburgers in particular."

But he also recommends against eating any undercooked meat, fish or shellfish.

If you think vegetarians are off the hook, sorry, you're wrong.

"We're seeing more and more outbreaks (of food poisoning) from fruits and vegetables because of open borders," Brooks, a specialist in infectious diseases, said.

Fortunately, careful washing can take care of most of the bacteria on fruits and vegetables, especially for people with

normal immune systems, he added.

Still, people who eat meat are at a bigger risk, said Woodruff.

"If you're cutting up a chicken and don't wash your countertops," she said, "then put your veggies in the same spot, you can pick up all kinds of stuff. You can't see it, but it's there."

Watch your symptoms

How do you know if your diarrhea, cramping, vomiting and headaches are caused by food poisoning?

"We get to that by exclusion," said TMH's Calonje. "There's no way we can look at a person" and know she has food poisoning, he said.

But you can go through a mental checklist. For example:

- Did anyone else develop the same symptoms?

- Did you eat something that you'd left out in the sun for a while?

- Did you change your baby's diaper and not wash your hands before you ate?

If it is food poisoning, the doctor said, your biggest problem likely will be dehydration.

"At least try to take a few sips if you can tolerate it," he said.

If the symptoms haven't abated in a few hours — especially if there's blood in your vomit or stools — you should call your doctor or go to the emergency room or walk-in clinic, Calonje said.

"You don't want to be in a situation where it's progressing," he warned.

But, if it's beginning to look as if life is worth living again, just have another sip of Gatorade and bear it.

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