

Daily Union Article  
Saturday Edition  
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September is National Food Safety Education month and I feel compelled to emphasize the importance of food safety in our community and homes. In the September FCS Agent newsletter I composed, I noted the recent cucumber recall as being one of the reasons food safety is important to everyone. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recently updated the statistics related to this outbreak. As of Tuesday, Sept. 15, there are two deaths, 91 hospitalizations and 418 confirmed cases being reported in 31 states. The deaths being reported are in California and Texas (one each). These cucumbers, distributed by Custom Produce Sales of Parlier, CA were sold under the Fat Boy label. Cucumbers sold under that label since August 1, 2015 are being voluntarily recalled because they may be contaminated with Salmonella. Of those who have fallen ill, 52% are children under the age of 18.

Although the United States has one of the most safe food supplies in the world, food borne illnesses are more common than one may think in this country. According to the CDC, 1 in 6 Americans gets sick by consuming contaminated foods or beverages each year. Many different disease-causing microbes, or pathogens, can contaminate foods, so there are many different foodborne infections. In addition, poisonous chemicals, or other harmful substances can cause foodborne diseases if they are present in food.

In the case of the Fat Boy cucumbers linked to the Salmonella outbreak, the tests and research conducted on the produce indicate that they were likely imported from Mexico. Produce moves from farm to market through multiple means of transportation, handling, and shipping conditions. There are many checks along the way and the FDA has an extensive amount of regulations to help keep our food chain safe for consumers. However, the responsibility does not lie solely on those handling food before it gets home. It also relies on consumer themselves.

Good personal hygiene is critical to food safety. Clean and neatly manicured hands are the first line of defense for food safety at home. Washing hands thoroughly and making sure all dirt and residue is removed from under fingernails will help reduce the transfer of undesirable bacteria from getting into the body. Clean food preparation surfaces before, during, and after meal preparation.

Keeping foods separate is another important step. Cross-contamination is the spread of germs from one surface to another by some form of contact. When food is placed on a

surface that has not been properly handled or cleaned, it will contaminate the food it comes in touch with. Likewise, when a contaminated food (or dirty hand) is placed on a clean surface, the surface becomes contaminated and thus contaminates anything else that touches it. It is likely that the Salmonella outbreak associated with cucumbers was caused by cross-contamination.

All foods have a recommended internal temperature for proper cooking. Bacteria cannot be seen by the naked eye and the internal temperature of a food cannot be determined by sight or touch. Using a food thermometer is the only way to ensure food reaches the proper temperature. Refer to the temperature charts provided by the United States Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Department as a guide for the minimum internal temperature needed to make sure the food is safe. You can find more information on cooked food temperatures at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/home>.

Storing food promptly and correctly is also important to food safety practices in the home. Food should not be out of the desired temperature range for more than two hours before being put in the refrigerator. Large amounts of food, such as chili or whole turkey, will need prepared into smaller portions and placed in containers so that the food can chill more quickly. You should not allow food to "cool" on the stove or table before putting it away. This only increases the risk of bacteria growth and increases the risk for food poisoning when is consumed later.

These four steps – clean, separate, cook and chill – are the foundation for good food safety practices in the home. They are the same steps required of restaurants, cafeterias, and food manufacturing plants. Consumers, together with the food industry, can reduce the risk of food borne illness by being attentive to these steps.

Celebrate Food Safety Education Month with your family and share this information so that everyone in the home benefits from safe food handling practices. For more information about food safety and safe food preparation, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!