

Grill It Safely

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Shelia Lewis, Family & Consumer Sciences

July 4th is considered by many the biggest barbecue day of the year. Every year Americans gather to celebrate that most wonderful of mid-summer holidays, Independence Day. The tradition of the 4th of July Barbecue is a long and old one. Today, barbecue & grilling it is as much a part of the celebration as fireworks and apple pie. To help you enjoy this holiday and the rest of the summer grilling season safely here are some check points for the next time you fire up the grill.

Shopping:

- When shopping, choose meat and poultry last, and don't put them in the trunk. The temperature there is too hot and bacteria will grow rapidly. Make the grocery store your last stop ---- meat and poultry should not be out of refrigeration more than 2 hours or 1 hour when the temperature is above 90 degrees F. If meat and poultry set out too long, bacteria can produce toxins that can cause illness and stay active even during cooking.
- Refrigerate meat and poultry immediately upon arriving home. Always store raw meat and poultry below other foods to prevent possible cross-contamination from their dripping. Keep your refrigerator at 40 degrees F.
- Purchase ground meat or poultry no more than a day or two before you plan to grill it. Other wise, freeze them. Grill larger cuts of meat, such as steaks, within 4 days of purchase or freeze them.

Preparation:

- Completely thaw meat and poultry in the refrigerator or just prior to cooking in a microwave. Frozen foods do not grill evenly and may be unsafe. Never defrost on the counter—bacteria will begin to grow. It takes about 24 hours to thaw 5 pounds of meat in the refrigerator.
- Clean up juice spills immediately so raw product does not get on a cooked product or on foods that won't be cooked. Juice spills should be cleaned with a paper towel or a clean dishcloth. Toss the paper towel or launder the dishcloth in hot soapy water before using it again.
- Marinate meat and poultry in the refrigerator. Sauce can be brushed on these foods while cooking, but never use the same sauce after cooking that has touched the raw product.
- Make ground beef patties about 1/2-inch thick by 4-inches in diameter (4 ounces or 4 patties per pound). This helps assure they cook thoroughly and evenly. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association NCBA advises patties this size will take 11 to 13 minutes to cook to a safe temperature of 160 degrees F. Based on beef that has been removed directly from the refrigerator; cooked over medium, ash-covered coals and grilled uncovered (www.beef.org).
- Unwashed hands are a prime cause of food-borne illness. Whenever possible, wash your hands with warm, soapy water for 20 seconds before handling food. When eating away from home, pack disposable wipes for cleaning hands if no hand-washing facilities are available.

Transporting:

- Transport meat and poultry to a picnic site in a cooler kept cold with ice or frozen gel packs. Pack food and cooler immediately before leaving home. Avoid frequently opening the cooler. Pack beverages in one cooler and perishables in another.
- Keep cooler in an air-conditioned vehicle for transporting and then keep in the shade or shelter at the picnic site. Remove at one time only the amount of food that will fit on the grill. Be sure to keep raw meat and poultry wrapped separately from cooked foods, or foods meant to be eaten raw such as fruits and vegetables.

Grilling:

- Cooking is key to meat and poultry safety. If needed, scrape the grill before grilling. Heat the grill to kill microorganisms before placing meat or poultry on it.
- Cook ground beef patties to 160 degrees F. The only way to accurately determine doneness is with an instant-read thermometer. The color alone cannot be used to assure a hamburger has been properly cooked. The thermometer should penetrate the thickest part of the hamburger. Insert the thermometer from the side about 2 to 3 inches so it reaches the center of the patty. Unless a food thermometer was used to verify the temperature, do not eat a ground beef patty that is pink or red in the middle.
- While the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends ground meats should be heated to 160 degrees F. To kill microorganisms, the temperature for a steak can be 145 degrees F. For “medium rare”; 160 degrees F. for “medium” and 170 degrees F. for “well done”. Use a tongs or spatula to turn steaks rather than a fork which punctures the meat and introduces bacteria into the interior of the meat.
- Whole poultry should be cooked to 180 degrees F. when tested in the thigh. Breast meat should be cooked to 170 degrees F. When poultry is done cooking, juices will run clear with no pink when you cut into the meat.
- Cook meat and poultry completely at the picnic site. Partial cooking of foods ahead of time allows bacteria to survive and multiply to the point that subsequent cooking may not destroy them.
- Use a separate clean tongs or spatula for removing meat or poultry from the grill and place on a clean plate to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked meat.
- Discard any food left out for more than two hours or one hour if the temperature is above 90 degrees F. When in doubt, throw it out!

Information taken from Grill It Safely, publication University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension.

Shelia Lewis is a Smith County Extension agent in family and consumer sciences. She can be reached at 903/535-0885 or via e-mail at sk-lewis@tamu.edu.

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