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Media Advisory

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Note to Editor: September is National Food Safety month, so Southwest District Health (SWDH) is promoting food safety practices with tips on proper food safety techniques and culminating with our annual Food Merit Awards on September 26, 2006.

Proper Cooking Temperatures Greatly Reduce Food-Related Illness

By C. J. Soltis
Southwest District Health
Consumer Protection Programs

Whether grilling burgers on the grill, preparing a roast for dinner, or baking a casserole for a pot-luck dinner, the threat of you or your family contacting a food borne illness is greatly reduced when you use proper cooking times and temperatures.

According to the United States Dept. of Agriculture Food Safety Inspection Services, one out of every four hamburgers turns brown before it has been cooked to a safe internal temperature. So, it is important for you to know that color and texture changes are not sufficient indicators to determine if bacteria in or on the food has been destroyed. The threat of E. coli comes from undercooked beef; Salmonella from undercooked chicken or runny eggs; Trichinosis from undercooked pork; and Listeria bacteria from fish and shellfish.

For your protection, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that food items be cooked to the following internal temperatures listed below.

Steaks and Roasts	145°F
Fish	145°F
Pork	160°F
Ground Beef	160°F
Egg Dishes	160°F
Poultry	165°F
Deer	165°F
Rabbit, Duck, Goose	180°F

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Meat and poultry products must be cooked completely, and then cooled in the refrigerator to properly re-heat later. No one should partially cook food to continue on the grill or in the oven later in the day or evening. Partially cooking food does not reduce the total time it takes to cook, as many people believe. What it does do, is allow food items to be in the danger zone (temperatures between 40°F and 140°F) for an extended period of time. This is the temperature range where bacteria multiply the quickest.

The safest method to determine if your food is heated to the correct temperature is to use a food thermometer. Using a food thermometer will assist in preventing your food from being over cooked while allowing you a safe and flavorful meal. Food thermometers can be purchased and found in the utensil aisle of most area grocery stores. Before using the thermometer, read the instructions, or check the stem of the thermometer for an indentation which shows how deep the thermometer must be inserted into the food item to achieve an accurate reading.

Some additional suggestions for using a food thermometer are:

- The food thermometer should be inserted into the thickest portion of the food without touching bone or fat.
- When taking the temperature of a large roast or casserole insert the thermometer at least 1 to 2 inches into the food item and check the temperature in multiple locations.
- Remove the food product from the grill or skillet before taking the temperature reading to ensure the correct temperature of the food without the influence of the heat source.
- Make sure you wash your thermometer with hot soapy water before and after using it.

When re-heating food, always heat thoroughly to 165°F or until the food is hot and steamy. If using the microwave rotate the dish at least once, and leave the product covered for at least 2 minutes to ensure heat is equal throughout.

Just as important as cooking food to the correct temperature, you should quickly cool leftovers to 40°F to slow any bacteria growth that may be present.

- Divide cooked food into shallow containers for rapid cooling,
- Refrigerate or freeze leftovers within 2 hours or sooner after they have been cooked.
- Allow cold air to circulate around the food in the refrigerator, so do not over pack the refrigerator.
- Store leftovers in the refrigerator and use within 4 days.

By cooking foods to a safe temperature, and cooling rapidly, you can successfully reduce the risk of unwanted bacteria from making you or your family ill. For additional help for handling meat and poultry, you may refer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Meat and Poultry Hotline (1-888-674-6854) or TTY 1-800 256-7072.

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