Handling Meat Safely

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Meat and poultry are perishable foods that must be handled safely to prevent foodborne illness. Many fresh, refrigerated and frozen foods contain bacteria that could cause illness if the food is mishandled or cooked improperly. As a consumer, your role as a safe food handler begins when you initially select meat products to purchase. Make it a habit to select meat and poultry just before you are ready to check-out. You should choose packages of meat that look fresh, are cold and are tightly wrapped. To help keep meat cold on your trip home, especially during warm weather, place meat in an ice chest. If you are running other errands, make your visit to the grocery store the last stop before going home.

Once home, immediately store meat in a refrigerator set at 40F or colder, or in a freezer at 0F or colder. The length of time meat can be safely stored in a refrigerator will vary depending on the meat product. For example, it's recommended that ground meat be stored refrigerated for only 1 to 2 days; if not cooked within this time, ground meat should be stored frozen. Beef steaks may be safely stored in a refrigerator for 3 to 5 days before cooking or freezing. Thaw frozen meat in your refrigerator or use the defrost cycle on a microwave. During the thawing process, place the meat on a plate to catch meat juices so they do not drip on other foods in your refrigerator. Never thaw meat at room temperature because bacteria multiply quickly between 40F and 140F.

It is extremely important to keep your food preparation area clean. Before and after handling raw meat, be sure to wash your hands with hot, soapy water. Aim to wash your hands for a minimum of 20 seconds before rinsing with hot water. Also, to prevent cross-contamination, countertops, cutting boards, knives and other utensils must be thoroughly washed with hot, soapy water after contact with raw meat. One common mistake made by food handlers is placing cooked meat on a plate that previously held raw meat. This practice re-contaminates the cooked meat with raw meat juices that may contain bacteria.

To prevent foodborne illness due to bacteria, ground meat including hamburgers, casseroles or other dishes containing ground meat, must be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 160F. Additional temperature guidelines for cooking meat may be obtained by contacting your local extension office. If you don't already have a meat thermometer, it is recommended that you invest in one so that you can measure the internal temperature of meat products during cooking. After your meal, immediately refrigerate leftovers in small portions so they cool rapidly. Leftovers should be reheated to an internal temperature of 165 before consuming. Using these common sense practices will help minimize your risk of foodborne illness.