

Understanding Safe Handling Labels

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Some food products, including meat and poultry, may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly. Research has indicated that many foodborne illness outbreaks are caused in part by simple food handling mistakes. To raise consumer awareness and provide advice for handling meat safely, safe handling labels are affixed to packages of raw and partially cooked meat and poultry products.

The issue of food safety has been highly publicized during the past few years. This has been in response to outbreaks of foodborne illness such as *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7. There is a group of bacteria called *Escherichia coli*, but you may know them by their more familiar name of *E. coli*. Within this group of bacteria are thousands of strains of *E. coli*, most of which are harmless to human health. These organisms are normally found in the intestines of warm-blooded animals, including food animals and humans. Certain types of *E. coli* bacteria can cause foodborne illness leading to disease problems.

E. coli 0157:H7 was first identified as a cause of human illness in 1982 when it was associated with two outbreaks of foodborne illness in Oregon and Michigan resulting from consumption of undercooked ground beef. This rare strain of *E. coli* is responsible for causing an illness called hemorrhagic colitis that is typically quite severe. Symptoms, which last 4 to 10 days, include severe abdominal cramps followed by watery diarrhea that often becomes bloody, vomiting and nausea, and possibly a low-grade fever. These symptoms generally appear 3 to 9 days after consuming food contaminated with *E. coli* 0157:H7. Hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) can result as a possible complication of hemorrhagic colitis. HUS can lead to acute kidney failure in children and in the elderly, and may result in death.

How can meat become contaminated with *E. coli* 0157:H7? Carcasses may become contaminated with intestinal or fecal material during slaughter procedures, and *E. coli* 0157:H7 may be carried through to the finished product. Person-to-person transmission has also been documented.

The safe handling label provides you with basic instructions on handling and preparing meat. It serves as a reminder that meat must be stored refrigerated or frozen. Meat should be thawed in a refrigerator or microwave, never on a countertop. Keep everything clean by washing hands, countertops and cooking implements with hot, soapy water. Thoroughly cooking ground meat to 160F internal temperature is the best protection against food borne illness. To keep

bacteria from multiplying in cooked food, don't let food sit out at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Refrigerate or freeze leftovers in shallow containers. Remember, if in doubt, throw it out.

For more information about the safe handling of meat and poultry, the United States Department of Agriculture has a tollfree meat and poultry hotline. Questions can be answered by calling 1-800-535-4555 between 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern time, Monday through Friday, or contact your local Cooperative Extension office.