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Food Safety for Cancer Care

Food safety is an important part of cancer care. To prevent getting an infection from food, it is important to follow food safety guidelines. These same guidelines should be followed by all people at all times, regardless of whether or not they are being treated for cancer. However, when undergoing cancer treatment, immune system function can be diminished temporarily. This means that people in cancer treatment may be more susceptible to infections from food. For this reason, it is important to focus some extra attention on good food safety during cancer treatment.

For people undergoing more intensive treatments, such as a stem cell transplant, more extensive food safety guidelines will need to be followed. In these cases, your clinic or hospital will provide these written guidelines to you.

Infections from food are sometimes referred to as "food poisoning" or "food borne illness." They can be caused by a variety of microorganisms, such as bacteria and viruses. Fortunately, nearly all infections caused by improper food storage and handling can be prevented by following proper food safety. Medications are available to help bolster the immune system during cancer treatment. Through a combination of better medications for the immune system and good food safety practices, the risk of food related infections can be greatly minimized.

Keeping It Clean - General Food Safety

To minimize the risk of food-related infections, use the following guidelines:

Food Handling

- When you grocery shop, keep raw meat, poultry, and seafood separate from all other foods.
- Use a plastic bag around each of these items to prevent them from dripping onto other foods.
- Use a plastic bag to store raw meat, poultry, and seafood so they don't drip onto other foods.

- Store raw meat, poultry, and seafood at the bottom of the fridge to minimize the likelihood of drips onto other foods.
- Wash your hands carefully before and after handling any food and before eating. Be sure to wash especially, after handling raw meat, poultry, eggs, and seafood. Ask others who are preparing your food to wash their hands often and carefully, too. Hand washing may eliminate 1/2 of all cases of food-borne illness and reduce the spread of colds and flu.
- When washing your hands, wash for a minimum of 20 seconds using plenty of soap and warm water. Rub hands together to make a lather and scrub all surfaces. Wash the backs of your hands and under and around your fingernails, too.
- You do not need an antibacterial soap, but you may use one if you wish.
- Rinse hands thoroughly, and dry with a clean, dry towel. You may want to use disposable paper towels during cancer treatment to further reduce the risk of food related infection.
- Separate all cooked and raw foods. Never reuse cutting boards, utensils, or plates that have touched raw meat, poultry, seafood, or eggs.
- Always use a clean cutting board. Wash cutting boards, dishes, and counter tops with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next item. A solution of 1 teaspoon of bleach in 1 quart of water can sanitize cutting boards and some countertops.
- If possible, use one cutting board for fruit, vegetables, or other ready-to-eat foods and a separate cutting board for meat, poultry, or seafood.
- Never place cooked food back on the same plate or cutting board that previously held raw food.
- Always marinate food in the refrigerator, not on the counter. Sauce that is used to marinate raw meat, poultry, or seafood should not be used on cooked foods.
- Refrigerate or freeze leftover foods within 1 hour. Store in shallow, covered containers. Store foods at <40 degrees F to minimize bacterial growth.



Cooking

- Be sure to cook meat, poultry, eggs, and seafood thoroughly.
- NEVER eat raw sushi, raw vegetable sprouts, or undercooked eggs.
- Use a meat thermometer to be sure your food is cooked through. You cannot "eyeball" food to determine if it is thoroughly cooked. For example, according to the USDA food safety and inspection service, one out of four hamburgers turns brown in the middle BEFORE the meat has reached a safe internal temperature.

Cook foods to proper temperatures:

- Ground beef, turkey, or chicken should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 165° F.
- Fresh beef (e.g. steak) should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 160° F.
- Whole chicken, turkey, duck, and goose should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 180° F.
- Fresh pork should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 170° F.
- Eggs should be cooked until both yolk and white are firm.
- Egg dishes should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 160° F.
- Leftovers and casseroles should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 165° F.

Foods To Avoid

To reduce the risk of food-related infection, avoid the following foods while you are in cancer treatment:

- Unpasteurized, raw milk, cheese, or other dairy products
- Cheeses, meats, cold cuts, and other food items from a deli counter
- Cheeses containing uncooked vegetables and spices, such as chili peppers
- "Moldy" and soft cheeses, such as blue cheese, Roquefort, Stilton, brie, feta, or farmer's cheese
- Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, fish, or eggs
- Cold smoked or pickled fish
- Raw tofu or tempeh
- Unwashed vegetables and fruit
- Unpasteurized fruit and vegetable juices
- Raw, unpasteurized apple cider

- Raw, uncooked sprouts (alfalfa, mung bean, others) or raw grains
- Unroasted or uncooked, raw nuts and seeds
- Salads from salad bar or deli
- Sun-tea or other "cold brewed" teas and drinks
- Fresh, cream-filled pastries, cookies, cakes, and cream puffs
- Uncooked brewers yeast

Bottom Line: Keep yourself safe and healthy during cancer treatment by taking extra precautions with your food preparations. Keep things clean, wash your hands often, and avoid unpasteurized dairy and juice and raw and undercooked foods, such as meat, poultry, eggs, and seafood.

Reviewed by Theresa Shepherd MS, RD, CND, CSO, 2/ 2018