

By: Alisha Fisher

K-State Research and Extension Greenwood County

Family and Community Wellness Extension Agent

“Outdoor Food Safety”

As the weather warms up and we start spending more time outside, whether for a picnic, barbecue, or a casual get-together with friends and family, it's essential to follow proper food safety practices. Warm temperatures and outdoor settings can increase the risk of foodborne illness if proper precautions aren't taken.

Start by preparing a clean environment that will be used for food preparation and serving. Public picnic tables and wooden surfaces are hard to clean and can harbor germs, so it's a good idea to bring a plastic tablecloth to create a clean workspace. Pack a rag and some extra water to wipe down areas where food will be handled, especially if you'll be setting up in a park or campground. Just like you would at home, remember to wash your hands before handling any food items. If you don't have access to soap and water, make sure you pack hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes. Clean hands are one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of bacteria. Keep food protected by covering dishes when they are not being eaten. This helps keep out insects, dirt, and other debris that could contaminate your food.

When transporting food to your picnic or cookout, keep raw and uncooked items separate from foods that are ready to eat, including fresh produce to prevent cross-contamination. Refrigerated items, such as cut fruits, deli meats, salads with mayonnaise or dairy-based dressings, and any dishes made with eggs or milk, should be packed in coolers filled with plenty of ice. Be sure the ice surrounds the food on all sides for maximum cooling, and keep coolers in the shade whenever possible. Only take perishable items out of the cooler when it's time to serve them. Don't let them sit out for more than two hours or just one hour if the temperature is over 90°F. If you're serving chilled items for a longer period, place them in shallow containers set in trays of ice to help maintain a safe temperature.

Don't rely on color alone to judge whether food is done when cooking or grilling. Use a food thermometer to ensure it has reached the proper internal temperature. Ground meats should reach 160°F, while all poultry should be cooked to at least 165°F. Once food is cooked, keep it warm by covering it with foil or an insulated container until it's time to serve. If you plan to bring leftovers home, come prepared with clean containers and enough space in your cooler to store them safely. Leftovers should be chilled quickly to avoid spoilage.

Whether you're grilling with friends, sharing snacks at the park, or hosting a family picnic, practicing good food safety habits ensures that you have done your part to keep everyone safe and healthy.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.