



**Ontario Home Economics Association**

*Ask a Professional Home Economist*

**For Immediate Release**

**Food Safety ~ Everyone is a Partner**

**by Diane O'Shea, P.H.Ec.**

According to Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada, between 11 and 13 million Canadians suffer annually from illnesses caused by food-borne bacteria. Symptoms range from feeling flu-like to experiencing stomach cramps, diarrhea, vomiting and fever. Young children are particularly vulnerable to food-borne illness – sometimes called food poisoning. Elderly people, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems are also at higher risk.

As the joys of late summer bring forth the produce of the lands in roadside stands, farmers' markets and grocery stores, the opportunities to consume local food at community events, family reunions, picnics and back-to-school lunches maximize. The consciousness of safe food handling by all partners in the food supply chain has never been more important.

**Who are the partners?** Consider the farm producer, the processor, the distributor, the retailer and the consumer. At farm markets, the producer generally wears the retailer's hat, in addition to his own. All of us share in the entire food process – from farm to fork. Food safety requires a partnership of collaboration to ensure the prevention of bacteria, viruses, parasites and pathogens that have the potential to make people ill.

Human health hazards due to contamination of fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, poultry, eggs and milk products are of prime concern to agricultural producers, health officials and consumers. Best management practices and compliance with health and safety regulations to prevent the growth of harmful micro-organisms are crucial components to the business of farming today. Recent reports, however, have pointed fingers at foods once thought to be fairly safe as the sources and sites of contamination.

The Centre for Science in the Public Interest has found fresh produce topping the list of foods implicated in outbreaks of food-borne illness. Some blame imports. However, there have been conflicting reports about the number of cases of food-borne illnesses in Ontario. Research shows that a significant number of infections occur each year and that many cases are under-reported, making tracking difficult. Consider the cost and burden to the healthcare system. While primary producers work toward contaminant-free produce, the task is also one for other stakeholders in the farm-to-fork process, where everyone is a partner.

To this end, Farmers' Markets Ontario in partnership with the Association of Supervisors of Public Health Inspectors of Ontario, the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education, and local public

health units recently embarked on a training and education initiative across Ontario, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Workshops and print materials reminded farmers' market managers, producers and vendors of the best ways to prepare, handle, transport, store and display fresh produce as well as other food products available at farmers' markets throughout the province.

Although the consumer is the final partner in the food safety chain, he or she may have the biggest responsibility of all. Studies indicate that most food-borne illnesses are caused by careless handling, improper storage or cooking, cross-contamination and lack of hand-washing.

### **Practice the four elements of safe food handling in the home:**

**CLEAN** – Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds before handling food and after handling meat, poultry, eggs and seafood, and after changing diapers, touching pets and using the washroom. Clean and then sanitize countertops, cutting boards and utensils with a mild bleach solution (5ml/1 tsp. bleach per 750ml/3 cups water) before and after food preparation. Thoroughly wash fresh produce under running water to remove dirt and residue. Use a brush to scrub fruits and vegetables that have firm surfaces such as oranges, melons, potatoes and carrots. Cut away damaged or bruised areas on produce, where bacteria can thrive. Wash out lunch boxes or bags every night.

**SEPARATE** – Cross-contamination occurs when bacteria or other pathogens spread from one food to another. It may happen when cooked or ready-to-eat foods come into contact with raw meat or uncooked foods, dirty hands or equipment. Separate raw meat, poultry and seafood from other foods in your grocery shopping cart and in your refrigerator. Seal raw meat, poultry and seafood in air-tight containers or plastic bags and place them on the bottom shelves of your refrigerator to prevent juices from dripping onto other food. Never place cooked food back on the same plate or cutting board that has previously held raw food.

**COOK** – Cook foods at recommended temperatures for the proper time. Generally, keep hot foods hot at 60°C (140° F) or hotter until served. Use a clean thermometer which measures the internal temperature of cooked foods to make sure meat, poultry, egg dishes, casseroles and other foods are cooked all the way through. Insert the thermometer into different spots to ensure even cooking. Wash your food thermometer with hot, soapy water before using it again. Keep soups, chili and hot dips piping hot before serving. Transport hot food to a party or to work in an insulated thermal container

**CHILL** – Cold temperatures slow down the growth of bacteria. Use a thermometer to test if your refrigerator is really 4°C (40°F) or colder. Avoid over-packing a refrigerator as air must be able to circulate to keep food safe. Transferring hot food to small, shallow containers before refrigerating allows for quicker chilling. Refrigerate foods within 2 hours of preparation. Cover and refrigerate leftovers promptly. Marinate foods in the refrigerator. Transport cold foods in an insulated bag with a cold pack. Never defrost food at room temperature; instead, thaw in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave if you will be cooking it immediately. If thawing in cold water, replace water every 30 minutes.

To learn more about your role in keeping food safe, check out [www.canfightbac.org](http://www.canfightbac.org).

**Diane O'Shea** is a London-based professional home economist, a partner in a family farm and market operation near Granton, Ontario and Head of the Family Studies Department at Medway High School. She understands all aspects of the farm-to-fork collaboration to make food safety everyone's business.

*The Ontario Home Economics Association, a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life. OHEA is a member of the Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education.*

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