**PROTECTING YOUR FAMILY FROM FOODBORNE ILLNESS**

Is it a mistake to put hot foods in a cold refrigerator?

Can frozen foods make you ill if they're thawed and then frozen again?

Why do people sometimes get sick from eating pork?

If you have ever asked any of these questions, we have some facts that can be helpful to you in keeping foods safe for your family and preventing illness from "food poisoning".

**How Foods Can Cause Illness**

Foods can cause illness when they contain a disease-producing agent ‑ such as bacteria or toxin-forming mold.

Illness does not always occur from contaminated food. However, if a susceptible person ‑ such as an infant, an elderly person, someone incapacitated by another illness, or sometimes even someone seemingly healthy ‑ eats enough food which contains disease‑producing agents, illness can result.

**How Heat And Cold Cut Down Contamination**

Bacterial contamination of foods can be reduced through either cooking or refrigeration. Both of these processes retard the growth of disease‑producing bacteria.

To grow and reproduce, bacteria need three things: moisture, warmth, and a source of food. If any of these are missing, bacteria will not grow.

When food is refrigerated, one of the necessities ‑ warmth ‑ is lacking, and thus bacteria growth is retarded.

Most bacteria are not killed by refrigeration. But refrigeration does stop them from multiplying. It also retards the ability of bacteria to produce a toxin, or poison.

On the other hand, cooking foods at high temperatures not only retards bacteria growth, but also kills bacteria.

**Safe Food‑Keeping Through Refrigeration**

Which kinds of foods require refrigeration? Perishable food products including potentially hazardous foods.

The potentially hazardous foods are those that consist in whole or in part of milk or milk products, eggs, meat, poultry, fish, and shellfish. These include such products as cream pies, custards, potato salad, and meat salads (tuna, chicken, etc.). It is important that all such foods be kept refrigerated.

Your responsibility for this begins in the store. You should:

\* Buy perishable foods ‑ including those that are potentially hazardous ‑ in small quantities, so you will not keep them too long before use.

\* If you're doing other shopping, make the supermarket the last stop, and take foods home immediately.

\* Always put refrigerated and frozen foods in your shopping basket last.

**Refrigeration rules to remember at home:**

\* Put foods in the refrigerator as soon as you get home.

\* Never leave leftovers on the table after a meal, but store them in the refrigerator immediately.

\* Make sure your refrigerator temperature is cold enough to keep foods safe.

\* Store foods in a small, shallow container. The more surface that is exposed to the cold, the faster the food will cool.

\* Keep food containers covered so that food particles from the shelf above will not fall into food stored below.

How cold should your refrigerator be? If food is to be kept for only three or four days, the temperature should be 45 degrees or below. If food is to be kept longer, it should be stored at 40 degrees F.

Above 45 degrees (and up to 115 degrees) both infectious bacteria and toxin‑producing micro‑organisms may grow rapidly ‑ foods may undergo a doubling of the bacterial growth every 15 to 30 minutes, so it is important to prepare and serve perishable foods with as little time lapse as possible after taking them from the refrigerator or freezer.

After the meal is over and you're putting away leftovers, or when you want to store a freshly prepared food for later use, is it necessary to cool hot food before placing it in the refrigerator? No. Today's refrigerators can quickly bring foods to the proper temperature for safekeeping, and no preliminary cooling is necessary.

Many foods can be kept in the refrigerator for several weeks, but since refrigeration does not kill bacteria (only retards their growth), it is wise to use perishable foods within a reasonably short span of time.

**Keeping Frozen Foods Safe**

Safe use of frozen foods begins in the store. When you're buying frozen foods, always check display cases to see that the foods are kept below the "frostline" or "load line" (the line marked on commercial freezer cabinets which indicates the safety level). Don't buy products that have not been stored correctly (above this line).

And again, don't "dally" after shopping ‑ take frozen foods home and put them in your freezer immediately.

The temperature in your home freezer should be kept at 0 degrees F or below.

When you're preparing frozen foods, always read labels carefully. Many labels will tell you that you should not try to refreeze a product. You might decide on a frozen food item for dinner, put it in the refrigerator to thaw, then decide later you want to use some other item instead. Do not try to refreeze food unless the label states it is safe to do so.

And always plan ahead, so you will have time to defrost frozen foods in the refrigerator. DON'T take frozen foods from the freezer and leave them to thaw at room temperature for long hours ‑ they could easily spoil and cause illness.