



## **What to make of all the food scares and still keep eating safely!**

The current rash of events related to contaminated foods is both confusing and scary for the consumer. For example, this past summer we had the ongoing story of spinach contaminated with E.coli O157. Then we had contaminated tomatoes. Now we hear that 80% of poultry is contaminated with Campylobacter.

So what is a consumer to do? First, let's get some perspective.

We have to know that all raw foods are contaminated with bacteria, and some of these are pathogens. In fact, we should assume that all raw meat and poultry is contaminated with pathogens such as Salmonella and Campylobacter, and handle it accordingly. Produce can also become contaminated with pathogens from the dirt and from contaminated water if it is used for irrigation and for washing the picked produce before it goes to market. This is really nothing new and there is no doubt that we will continue to hear about outbreaks of illness associated with contaminated raw foods. But, consumers can take steps to protect themselves, no matter what new food scares occur. The last line of defense against food poisoning is in understanding and employing simple, safe food handling practices at home, as follows:

- Wash hands thoroughly following contact with raw food, especially meat & poultry and their juices. If the juices leak out of the package and get on your hands at the store, use an alcohol gel to sanitize your hands.
- At home, store all meat and poultry in a container in the refrigerator (at less than 40 degrees F), so that the juices do not drip onto other foods.
- Refrigerate all green leaf salads.
- Clean and sanitize all surfaces that come into contact with meat and poultry, such as the cutting board and knife, so as to prevent cross-contamination to other foods. Use an EPA approved food -surface sanitizer or a bleach solution.
- Do not mop up juices with the kitchen sponge, because bacteria thrive in the sponge and can contaminate the next surface that is wiped. Use paper towels instead.
- Cook meat thoroughly to an internal temperature of at least 160 degrees F. Use an instant read meat thermometer to check.
- Do not put cooked meats back onto a dish that contained the raw meat.
- Thoroughly wash all fresh produce, including pre-packaged, pre-washed salads under running water.

In addition, some members of the family are especially vulnerable to the effects of food poisoning because of their immature or compromised immune systems. Individuals at higher risk include children under five and adults over 65, pregnant women, individuals with pre-existing medical conditions and those undergoing chemotherapy etc. These individuals should avoid all raw or undercooked foods of animal origin, including eggs. All fruit, vegetables and salads should be carefully rinsed under running water.

For more information on food borne illnesses go to [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).

Written by Liz Scott, Co-Director of the Simmons Center and co-author of *How to Prevent Food Poisoning. A Practical Guide to Safe Cooking, Eating, and Food Handling* (Scott/Sockett. 1998. Published by John Wiley & Sons).