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Food Safety: Grilling No Different Than Kitchen Cooking

Summer is officially here and the smells of barbecue frequently fill the air. The Fourth of July is at the top the list of the most popular grilling holidays, but there has been an increase in grilling meals year-round according to the Hearth, Patio and Barbecue Association.

The Association reports that 86 percent of households own an outdoor barbecue, grill or smoker, and 62 percent of grill owners use them year-round.

Karen Blakeslee, food science extension associate for K-State Research and Extension and coordinator of the Rapid Response Center, said no matter what type of outdoor cooker—gas, charcoal or electric—a person has, he or she should think about cleaning the cooker as the spring and summer outdoor cooking season approaches. Once the grill is clean and ready for use, keep several food safety tips in mind.

Give yourself a clean start

“The heat does burn off a lot of food particles, but it’s a good idea to use a grill brush and scrub it well,” Blakeslee said. “If you can take the grill off, scrub both sides so you can get as much charred residue off as you can. If there’s any grease left from last year, try to scrape that off, too.”

Also clean out leftover charcoal, ashes and wood from the last outdoor cooking season, and make sure vents are clean and not plugged up, she said. For a gas grill, make sure propane connections are tight and hoses are not cracked to prevent potential gas leaks.

Once the grill is clean, make sure the area around the grill is also free of debris that could have collected through the winter, and stabilize the grill on a flat, cement surface, Blakeslee said. Keep the cooker out of garage, out of the grass and out of traffic flow to prevent pets and children from knocking the cooker over.

Food safety for meat

Grilling is no different than cooking inside of your kitchen, as the same food safety principles apply to both, Blakeslee said. When preparing meat for grilling, it is best to thaw it out first, so it doesn’t take too

long to cook on the grill. Thaw meat in the refrigerator, so it stays cold while it's thawing. Thawing it under cold running water is acceptable if a person needs to prepare the meat in a rush.

"For some smaller foods, such as hamburgers, it would be fine to put them frozen on the grill, but you'll end up with a better product, not overcooked or charred, if you thaw it out first," Blakeslee said.

When transferring meat from the kitchen to the grill, she said, keep the raw meat on one plate and the finished, cooked meat on another plate, or wash the plate in between the transfer to and from the grill. Apply the same method of separating or washing with utensils used for raw and cooked meat. This helps avoid cross-contamination.

Also marinate meat in the refrigerator, Blakeslee said. Once the meat is taken out of the marinade, dispose of the leftover marinade. Some people like to use the marinade as a glaze on the cooked meat, but they must bring it to a boil first to kill any bacteria that might be present from the raw meat.

Use a thermometer to ensure the meat is cooked to the proper safe temperature and to lessen the chance of overcooking, she said. The internal temperature should be taken in the middle of the cut.

"For example, if you are cooking burgers, insert the thermometer into the side so that more of the thermometer stem actually gets into the meat and you get a good reading," Blakeslee said.

Ground meat products including beef, pork and lamb, should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 degrees. All poultry should be cooked to 165 degrees, and steaks and pork chops to at least 145 degrees.

Blakeslee recommends checking each piece of meat on the grill, especially if the thickness of each piece varies.

Put small items such as cut-up meat, shrimp and scallops on skewers so they don't fall through the grates, she said. Fish pans with small holes can be used to hold tender, flaky pieces of fish. Firmer fish such as salmon and halibut could probably cook on the grill in a steak-like form.

Food safety for sides

Planning is important when including sides on the grill, in addition to the meat, Blakeslee said. A grill pan works well to cook fruits and vegetables on the grill, but it takes a short amount of time to cook these. If these are cut in slices, they can go on the grill after the meat so the meal is finished about the same time.

For picnics where people bring sides such as salads that need to be kept cold, make sure to have a refrigerator or ice chests on hand, she said.

"I would keep a separate ice chest for the beverages, because that one is going to be opened and closed more often," Blakeslee said. "That way, you don't lose too much cold temperature from the ice chest."

Keep hot foods, such as baked beans, hot by transporting them in crock-pots and plugging them in at the picnic, she said. Some slow cookers have multiple slots to keep many things hot at the same time.

The most important food safety prevention step is to always wash your hands before, during and after meal preparation. Use warm water, soap and rub your hands together for 20 seconds to get the best results. If water is not available, hand sanitizers can be used as long as visible dirt is removed first for the sanitizer to be effective.

More information about food safety for grilling and picnics can be found at your local Southwind Extension offices by contacting Kathy at 620-365-2242 or by going online to [K-State Research and Extension's food safety website](#) or the [Rapid Response Center's website](#).