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BREAK OUT THE BARBECUE, BUT AVOID AN OUTBREAK OF FOOD POISONING
Barbecue safety tips from the Westchester County Health Department

Planning to give your grill its first seasonal workout this Memorial Day weekend?

Whether you've got jerk chicken, lamb kebab, carne asada, baby back ribs or hotdogs and hamburgers on the menu, follow these Health Department tips to prevent a painful bout of food poisoning this summer, the peak season for that avoidable ailment.

"The number of bacterial food poisoning cases from E. Coli and salmonella rise in the summer months," said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. "Kick back and relax, but don't relax your food safety standards when cooking and eating outdoors. Warm weather hastens food spoilage."

Foodborne illness can be very serious, requiring hospitalization, and may even be fatal. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that foodborne illnesses result in more than 300,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths each year throughout the United States.

So, take these precautions:

- Thaw meat and poultry slowly in the refrigerator or under cold running water before cooking. Microwave defrosting is acceptable if the meat will be cooked immediately afterwards.
- Harmful bacteria usually grow in the "danger zone" between 40° and 140° F, so keep meat and poultry in the refrigerator until you are ready to grill. Marinate it in the refrigerator too. If you want to use some of the marinade as a sauce on cooked food, be sure to boil it first to kill the bacteria from the raw beef or poultry, or set a portion of it aside so it does not come into contact with raw meat.

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- Only precook in the oven or microwave immediately before finishing on the grill. Never partially grill meat or poultry and finish cooking later.
- When transporting food, use a cooler with ice to keep it at 40°F or below. Everything should stay chilled until immediately before it will be cooked or consumed. Keep the cooler out of the direct sun and avoid opening the lid too often. It helps to keep beverages in a separate cooler.
- Be sure to keep cold all mayonnaise-based salads such as coleslaw and potato salad.
- As always, cleanliness is essential to prevent foodborne illness. Wash hands, surfaces and utensils frequently with soap and water or antiseptic wipes.
- Never use the same plate, cutting board and utensils for cooked food that you used for raw meats and poultry. Bacteria in the juices of raw meat and poultry can contaminate safely cooked food.
- Meat and poultry cooked on a grill browns very quickly but may not be cooked inside. Always use a food thermometer to be sure the food has reached a safe internal temperature. In the case of whole poultry this should be 180°F in the middle. Hamburgers and pork chops should reach 160°F throughout. Beef, veal, and lamb chops can be cooked to 145°F.
- After cooking, keep meat and poultry at 140°F or warmer until eaten. If fully cooked meats like hot dogs need to be reheated, grill them to 165°F.
- Refrigerate any hot or cold leftovers promptly in shallow containers. Discard any food that is left out for more than two hours after cooking, or one hour if temperature is above 90°F.

For more information, please call the Westchester County Department of Health at (914) 813-5000 or visit the Health Department website at www.westchestergov.com/health.