

Flu Bug or Food Bug?
Part One
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Feeling a bit under the weather? Think you have the 24 hour flu? Think again....you may have food poisoning! Flu-like symptoms such as nausea, fever, diarrhea or vomiting may occur soon after ingesting tainted food, or may occur two or more days later. In fact, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), food poisoning affects 25 percent of Americans every year.

It seems as though we hear new contamination reports every day. From tomatoes and hot peppers to meat and eggs and peanut butter, no food remains safe from the possibility of contaminating pathogens. Food borne illnesses come from many sources, including chemicals, parasites, bacteria, viruses and fungi. Some types of food poisoning cause little more than the mild, flu-like symptoms, while others can cause more serious illnesses, even leading to death.

What can be done to prevent food poisoning? First and foremost, WASH! Improper food handling causes most of the cases of food borne illness. Begin by washing your hands. The University of Washington, Hall Health website has a great video to watch on proper hand washing from the CDC (<http://depts.washington.edu/hhpccweb/article-detail.php?ArticleID=501&ClinicID=1>). The site recommends that, "One of the best things you can do to prevent illness is to remember to wash your hands. **The best way to wash your hands is to:**

- **Wet your hands with warm water and soap.**
- **Wash your hands for 20 seconds, about the time it takes to hum 'Happy Birthday' to yourself.** Rub your hands together to loosen any dirt and germs. Rub between fingers, and over your wrists, don't forget your thumbs. Get under your fingernails where germs can hide, too. Rinse under clean, warm water. Warm water is better than cold water to get the germs off.
- **Dry your hands with paper towels.** After being used once, a cloth towel might have germs on it, so **if you prefer cloth towels, wash them frequently.**"

Many people have become sick after eating lettuce, spinach and other vegetables which were not properly cleaned. Rinse all produce under cold, running water for at least 15 seconds. If you can, rub the surface of the produce to help remove pathogens that may be on the outside of the plant.

In addition to washing produce, wash all surfaces that the food will contact. Be sure to use clean cloths or sponges when cleaning surfaces and utensils. Do not spread bacteria with dirty dish rags. Disinfect and sanitize surfaces regularly using a diluted bleach solution-1 teaspoon of bleach mixed with one quart of hot water should do the trick. Remember to wash surfaces before and after contact with food, especially raw meat, poultry, fish or eggs.

Now that everything's clean, make sure to keep food at the proper temperature. Beware of the dreaded "danger zone," that is, a temperature between 40°F and 140°F.

This range provides a perfect temperature condition for rapid bacterial growth. The adage, “keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold” can keep you safe. Refrigerate leftovers promptly. Put hot foods in shallow containers and surround with ice to cool down quickly and make sure the refrigerator is set to 40°F or below. Use the refrigerator to thaw frozen foods safely. A counter top is sure to be in the “danger zone” and foods that have been frozen contain bacteria and other pathogens that multiply rapidly under ideal temperature conditions.

If unsure about proper thawing techniques, call the Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County. Master Food Preservers are available to answer home food preservation questions; leave a message at (530) 621-5506. The Master Food Preservers also sponsor free public classes.

Tomorrow, November 6th, join us for a free class on how to preserve foods using low or no sugar. The class is from 10 to 12 at the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about the public education classes and activities, go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Food_Preservers/. Next week, more about home food safety!