Cooking is a Matter of Degrees

Foodborne Illnesses

Foodborne illnesses usually cause flu-like symptoms due to harmful bacteria in food. Each year, there are 76 million illnesses (1 in 4 Americans), 325,000 hospitalizations and over 5,000 deaths with costs in the billions of dollars due to these types of illnesses. Temperature abuse is one of the top causes of foodborne illnesses.

Stopping the Growth of Pathogens

Temperature control is one way to kill, slow or stop the growth of harmful bacteria that cause foodborne illnesses. At temperatures between 40 °F and 140 °F (also called the temperature danger zone), bacteria can double in number approximately every 20 minutes. In a few hours, foods left at these temperatures could contain harmful levels of these bacteria and cause foodborne illnesses if eaten.

Freezer and Refrigerator Temperatures

Studies have shown that freezing food at 0 °F or below will stop the growth of bacteria but will not destroy them. As food begins to thaw, harmful bacteria can begin to grow.

Refrigerating food at 40 °F or below will slow the growth of bacteria. Therefore, it is important to use food within recommended storage times.

Beef, Veal, Lamb and Pork

For safety reasons, cook beef steaks, roasts, veal and lamb to a minimum internal temperature of 145 °F. If desired doneness of meat is medium, cook to 160 °F and to 170 °F for well done. Ground beef, veal, lamb, and pork should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 °F.

It is always best to use a food thermometer to ensure that meat has reached a safe internal temperature. If one is not available, make sure that the juices of the meat run clear. Never eat ground meat that is still pink.
Eggs

Eggs should be cooked until they are firm. Cook egg sauces, custards and casseroles to an internal temperature of 160 °F.

Studies have shown that approximately 1 in 20,000 eggs contain the harmful bacteria, Salmonella. To avoid eating a contaminated egg, NEVER eat any food that contains raw or partially cooked eggs.

Poultry

The harmful bacteria present in and on poultry require high temperatures to kill. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that white meat be cooked to an internal temperature of 170 °F and dark meat to an internal temperature of 180 °F for quality purposes. It is important to check the internal temperature of poultry in several places to ensure that it has reached safe internal temperatures.

Check the doneness of poultry with a food thermometer. To get an accurate reading, do not let the thermometer touch the bone. Insert it into the thickest part of the meat. If one is not available, make sure the juices of poultry run clear.

Stuffing

If stuffing is cooked inside meat or poultry, it can act as an insulator and may not reach 165 °F by the time the meat or poultry is done. For safety reasons, stuffing should be cooked separately.

Leftovers

Leftovers should be reheated to 165 °F. Foods should be steaming hot and liquid foods should be boiling.

If heating leftovers in a microwave, be sure to cover the food and stir it often. Foods cook unevenly in the microwave, creating hot or cold spots in the food.