

Grillin' and Chillin'? Remember food safety, says K-State expert

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

Kansas State University food scientist Karen Blakeslee says food safety needs to be part of summer parties, especially when those get-togethers involve grilling food outdoors.

“To start with,” she said, “wash your hands. That’s the No. 1 step before you start handling any food, and then wash them again after you’ve handled any kind of raw meat.”

Much like cooking food indoors, home chefs need to keep a food thermometer close at hand, Blakeslee said. For meat, there are three temperatures that consumers should store to memory:

- **145 degrees Fahrenheit** for steaks, roasts, chops, fish and other whole cuts of meat.
- **160 F** for ground meat, including beef, pork and lamb.
- **165 F** for all types of poultry.

Those temperatures include products that are smoked, cooked on a grill or indoors.

The recommended temperatures relate to the internal temperature of the meat. “Without a food thermometer, it’s very subjective” as to whether the meat is cooked properly, Blakeslee said. Judging doneness by color or pressing the meat with your finger are also subjective, she noted.

To more accurately measure for doneness, insert the tip of the thermometer into the center of the meat. With a digital thermometer, the temperature sensor is normally in the tip, so those can be inserted into the top of the meat product.

“But the ideal way to do it – like with a hamburger – is to insert it from the side,” Blakeslee said. “That is the best way to reach the center of the product.”

A thermometer with a dial display is another option. “If you look on the stem of a dial face thermometer, there should be a dimple, about halfway up the stem. Insert this type of thermometer into the food so that the little dimple gets into the meat product to get an accurate measurement.”

Some other food safety tips that Blakeslee offered:

Keep meat cold until you’re ready to use it

Resist the temptation to let meat sit on a counter for long periods of time. “You could let it warm up a little bit (before cooking) – about 30 minutes. But please refrain from letting it sit out for hours. That invites any bacteria that could be on the meat to start growing.”

Freeze meat that won’t be used soon after you buy it

If planning an event, consider buying meat 2-3 days before cooking it. Otherwise, Blakeslee said, “you need to freeze it.”

Frozen meat is best thawed in the refrigerator, not on a countertop. “Plan ahead for thawing,” Blakeslee said. “The amount of thawing time you’ll need depends on the size of your meat product.”

Steaks can typically be thawed in a refrigerator in 24 hours. A brisket might take 3-4 days.

Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold

Side dishes are usually cold foods; keep them in a refrigerator until you're ready to serve them. Ice chests are handy for chilling side dishes. Cold foods should be kept at 40 F or lower, while hot foods should be kept at 140 F or higher.

Store food and eat leftovers promptly

Store food within 1-2 hours of serving them. Foods should be divided into shallow containers and placed in the refrigerator. "Today's refrigerators are very efficient, so you do not need to set them on the counter until they cool," Blakeslee said.

Leftovers should be eaten within 3-4 days, otherwise transferred to the freezer for later use. "We all need to work better at reducing food waste," she said. "One way to do that is managing leftovers. Leftovers are great; they make an easy lunch or quick supper, or you can re-purpose them into a completely different meal."

'Give Mayo a Break'

Blakeslee said mayonnaise often gets a bad rap for being a food safety concern, but the popular dressing is high in acid and can fend for itself.

"Mayo is not the problem," Blakeslee said. "It's what you mix into the mayo that is the problem. Cooked potatoes, hard boiled eggs...those are the ingredients that need refrigeration to reduce food safety risks.

"The mayonnaise is just going along for the ride," she adds. "So, give mayonnaise a break. It's how you handle the rest of the food that really matters."