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media release

No room at the table for food-related illnesses

As many as five million Australians each year suffer from food-related illnesses and it is estimated that of these cases around 10 to 20 per cent are the result of poor food handling or storage by people in their own homes.

Hunter New England Health Public Health Physician Dr Tony Merritt said there was often an increase in the number of food-related illnesses during the summer period as the temperature rises.

“Summer is a time of higher risk for food poisoning because the weather is warmer, the fridge is overloaded and we’re cooking for more people than we usually do. It can make for perfect conditions for food poisoning bugs to multiply leading to food poisoning,” Dr Merritt said.

“With food such an important part of the festive season – whether it’s a holiday barbecue for the family or a simple picnic at the beach - it is important to take a few steps to minimise the risk of illness.”

“The last thing we want is for our guests to become sick with food poisoning. Unfortunately, this is too often what happens.

“Following a few simple rules can make for a safe and enjoyable summer, and minimise the risk of illness,” Dr Merritt said.

- Prepare foods as close as possible to eating time.
- Use separate cutting boards and utensils for raw meat and poultry, and wash them thoroughly before further use.
- Cook foods thoroughly. Meat dishes need to be fully cooked.
- If you cook large amounts of food in advance, divide it into smaller portions or shallow containers, cover and place in fridge or freezer.
- Refrigerate leftovers immediately after the meal.
- Wash hands before preparing food and immediately after handling raw meat, raw chicken or eggs. Wash hands with soap and warm water and dry thoroughly.
- Keep food at a safe temperature - less than five degrees Celsius or more than 60 degrees Celsius.
- Remember the ‘two-hour rule’. When entertaining with a large meal or buffet - don’t let perishable foods linger at room temperature for longer than two hours.

“And always remember that the best rule of thumb is ‘if in doubt, throw it out’,” Dr Merritt said.

“People who have had recent symptoms of gastroenteritis should not prepare food until at least 48 hours have passed since symptoms resolved.”

If you think you might be ill with a food-related illness, contact your GP. To report an outbreak call the NSW Food Authority on 1300 552 406.

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