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NSF International Survey Finds U.S. Consumers Practice Inconsistent Food Safety Behaviors

Americans Need More Food Safety Education for the Home

ANN ARBOR, Mich. – Americans are uncertain about some basic food safety practices in the home, according to a recent survey from NSF International, a not-for-profit public health and safety organization. A phone survey of 1,000 American consumers found that people are in fact doing either too much or too little when it comes to the safe handling and preparation of meals. For example, consumers are taking great caution in the initial food preparation stages, as 78% of respondents knew the right way to defrost meat and poultry safely (such as defrosting in a refrigerator), but only 20% of them bother to use a meat thermometer to ensure food is properly cooked.

Similarly, consumers are overly cautious when it comes to discarding leftover food too soon and relying perhaps too heavily on expiration dates on food packages. Survey findings indicated that 40% percent of consumers either do not save leftovers or throw out leftovers within one to two days. However, leftovers stored properly can likely be saved for upwards of three to four days. A similar trend was found with consumers' threshold for expiration dates – as two-thirds (66%) of consumers don't eat (and don't serve) food past the date shown on the label. In reality, Americans seem to be unaware that many food product dates are a guide for freshness and not directly related to food safety.

Additional survey results found:

- **Consumers Can Get Lazy When it Comes to Safe Hand Washing Practices:** While 90% of consumers wash their hands after handling raw meat or poultry, a fifth (20%) of consumers aren't using warm water and soap – which is considered the most effective combination when it comes to reducing exposure to bacteria that causes foodborne illness.
- **Few Know That They Can Re-Freeze Meat:** Even though it is safe to refreeze foods that were thawed in the refrigerator, only (31%) of Americans are aware that it is okay to do so. Because moisture levels are normally reduced during the thawing process, the major concern when refreezing foods is a potential reduction in quality.

- **Most Rewash Pre-Packaged Foods:** Over half (60%) of consumers surveyed always re-wash pre-packaged fruits and vegetables (such as ready-to-eat salads), but it's not necessary. Prepackage produce that is labeled as prewashed in a sealed container does not need to be rewashed.
- **Food Safety Habits May Depend on Who You Are and Where You're From:** Survey results found that food safety habits vary between income levels, age groups and different levels of education.

“These survey findings demonstrate the need for additional consumer education around food safety in the home. Many of the food safety practices we learn at home when we're young are carried with us through life and passed to the next generation,” says Cheryl Luptowski, Home Safety Expert for NSF International. “Food safety is everyone's responsibility, and consumers need to put added attention around food safety practices in the home. Learning, understanding and changing food safety behavior through simple everyday practices will make a substantial difference in reducing the incidence of foodborne illness in America.”

Some basic food safety practices that NSF International recommends for the home include:

- **Not All Handwashing Creates Equal Results:** Wash hands with soap and warm water before cooking and/or after handling raw meat and poultry. Warm water is recommended because it is more effective at removing grease and grime by increasing soap's ability to penetrate dirt and oils found on the skin. Additionally, consumers should lather their hands for the recommended 20 seconds before rinsing off the soap. This is best achieved by sing “Happy Birthday” twice when [handwashing](#).
- **Rely on Food Thermometers Over Visual Cues to Determine Doneness:** Always use a food thermometer to ensure that meat and poultry are thoroughly cooked. Using senses such as sight, smell and taste are not consistently reliable when gauging if meat and poultry are cooked to the proper temperature.
- **Defrost Foods Safely:** Food can be safely defrosted by three methods:
 - Place covered food in a shallow pan or on a plate on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator.
 - Microwave the food until thawed and then immediately cook it.
 - Wrap the food in plastic wrap and completely submerge it in cold water.
- **Rewash Pre-packaged Foods:** Consumers should always rewash pre-packaged produce that is in an open package or does not specifically state it is prewashed. Rewashing all pre-packaged produce is an additional precaution consumers can take to reduce the likelihood of consuming food contaminated with harmful bacteria.
- **Avoid Stale Party Platters:** Never eat foods (such as party platters) that have been left at room temperatures for more than two hours.
- **Discard Leftovers Promptly:** Most leftovers should be consumed within 3-4 days or disposed of thereafter. If you don't plan to consume leftovers right away, consider freezing, which can preserve food safely for longer durations of time.

Methodology

The Food Safety Survey was developed by NSF International. The survey was fielded via ORC CARAVAN Telephone Omnibus between July 22 and July 25, 2010 among a nationally

representative sample of 1,000. The margin of error for the findings is +/- 3.1 percentage points with a confidence interval of 95 percent. The survey sought to better understand consumer behaviors and practices around food safety and shed light on consumers' knowledge of food safety best practices.

About NSF International

NSF International, an independent not-for-profit organization, certifies products and writes standards for food, water and consumer goods to minimize adverse health effects and protect the environment (www.nsf.org). With sixty-five years of experience in food safety inspection, certification, and auditing, NSF International is a known leader in the food safety industry-working with consumers, companies and governmental agencies.

NSF International's programs include food equipment certification programs for home and industrial appliances as well as food supplier programs that verify food and bottled beverages are produced according to national and global food safety standards. To see how NSF helps protect and improve food safety throughout the food supply chain visit www.nsf.safetytips.org

NSF is committed to the advancement of domestic and international food safety. In March, NSF International co-sponsored the 2010 Food Safety Education Conference with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The conference discussed tools and technologies that empower consumers worldwide to know and practice proper food safety practices. To learn more about this year's conference visit the USDA's website.

About ORC

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