

September 17, 2008
Press Release

Connie Aclin
Extension Educator
LSU AgCenter
caclin@agctr.lsu.edu

Tail Gating the Safe Way

Even the diehard rival football fans agree on one thing: tail gating with friends is as much fun (almost) as watching your team score a touchdown! Whether you tail gate before the Tigers enter Death Valley or the Bulldogs take the field at Tech or the whistle blows to start the Independence Bowl, a few food-handling precautions can prevent illness from sidelining you.

A key ingredient is planning. Food born illnesses can be avoided by careful preparation, storage, transportation and service of foods that are high risk. Staphylococcus and salmonella—two common bacteria that cause food poisoning—are associated with certain foods. Milk, milk products, eggs, meat, poultry, fish and shell fish all can harbor these bacteria. Depending on how they are prepared, foods containing these ingredients must be kept either hot (at least 140 degrees F.) or cold (40 degrees F. or below) to prevent food poisoning.

Take special care in preparing tail-gate foods. I abide by these four basic commandments of food safety:

1. Make sure all equipment and utensils are clean.
2. Wash hands before and during handling food.
3. Cook food thoroughly.
4. Do not leave food standing at room temperature

The importance of clean hands can't be overstressed. At the tail-gate site, use disposable hand wipes or antibacterial gels to clean your hands before you handle food, or bring jugs of water for hand washing.

Pack only the amount of food you'll consume before the game. Most foods are safe for short periods of time if packed properly. That means cold foods kept cold and hot foods kept hot.

Take cold food directly from the refrigerator or freezer. Wrap in clean plastic wrap or sandwich bags to make clean-up easier. Place a cold source in the cooler. You can purchase commercial ice packs or make your own by placing ice cubes in a plastic bag, then wrapping in foil.

For a relaxed, worry-free tail gate party, keep your perishable foods like ham, potato salad, hamburger, hot dogs, lunch meat, cooked beef or chicken in insulated chests. Cold foods in one; hot foods in another.

While all mayonnaise-based salads should be kept on ice, store-bought mayonnaise or salad dressing are not food poisoning villains. Contrary to popular belief, adding mayonnaise does not increase the risk of food poisoning. In fact, most commercially prepared mayonnaise and salad dressings contain acidic additives like lemon juice which slows bacterial growth. Salt in mayonnaise also retards bacterial growth. The culprit that has given mayonnaise and salad dressing based foods like chicken and tuna salads a bad name is the protein food, such as egg. These foods must be kept chilled until eaten to be safe.

If cooking foods on site remember to not cross-contaminate between raw and cooked foods. Always take up cooked meat and poultry with clean utensils on a clean plate to serve. Re-using utensils, plates or bowls that came in contact with raw food can contaminate cooked food.

Try to serve cooked food immediately. If you must delay, be sure to keep it at a safe holding temperature-roughly 140° to 165° F.

Put all remaining perishable food back in the cooler as soon as you finish eating. Don't leave them out during the game. Food should never be left out for more than 2 hours. When possible, put the ice chest in the passenger area of the car for the trip home. It's much cooler than the trunk.

Fiesta Burgers

1 ½ pounds lean ground beef
¼ cup onion, chopped
2 tbsp. red bell pepper, finely chopped
3 tbsp. picante sauce or salsa
2 tsp. prepared Dijon-style mustard
1 tbsp. prepared horseradish (optional)
salt and pepper to taste
4 sesame seed hamburger buns
leaf lettuce and sliced tomatoes

Combine ground beef, onion, red bell pepper, picante sauce, mustard, horseradish and salt and pepper. Mold into 4 patties and cook on grill until juices run clear. Approximate values per serving: 557 calories, 33 grams fat, 132 mg cholesterol, 44 g protein, 17 g carbohydrates, 437 mg sodium.

Yield: 4 patties

Source: USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline