

Food Safety Tips for the Budget-Conscious

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1 Eggs, lettuce, peanuts, spinach. It seems as if every time we turn around there is another outbreak of a scary foodborne illness. This summer's huge egg recall was the latest reminder that we do battle against dangerous pathogens like E. coli and salmonella in our kitchens every day.

2 That battle can be expensive. After a recall makes headlines, it is not unusual for consumers to flock to higher-priced organic and locally grown meats, poultry, eggs and produce that can cost two or three times as much as conventional food. And expensive antibacterial soaps and washes, cutting boards and meat thermometers are promoted as tools of the trade for a germ-free kitchen.

3 Kathleen McCleary of Falls Church, Va., revamped her shopping and cooking routines after she became ill with E. coli that she and her doctors thought she got from bagged lettuce. The 50-year-old novelist described her new routine: "I buy almost all my meat and produce from the local farmers' market, I cook everything thoroughly, my cutting board is clearly labeled on either side for meats and vegetables and I keep a little hydrogen peroxide on my sink to wash down surfaces where any dangerous germs could lurk."

4 Ms. McCleary estimates that her grocery bill is 20 to 30 percent higher than it used to be. "I'm still a careful shopper and watch my budget, but the extra expense is worth it to me," she said. "I just never want to get that sick again, and I never want to put my kids at risk."

5 There is good reason to be scared into action. Every year, 76 million cases of foodborne illness occur, leading to about 300,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths. Young children, pregnant women, the elderly and anyone with a compromised immune system are most at risk for getting a severe or life-threatening case of food poisoning, but anyone can get hit hard. Survivors of serious cases can have long-lasting health issues like kidney problems.

6 As more outbreaks occur, the costs to society are skyrocketing. As of this year, the nation spent an estimated \$152 billion annually on medical and lost productivity costs because of illnesses from tainted food, according to a recent study by the Produce Safety Project at Georgetown University. And that doesn't begin to count the millions of dollars companies spend each year on recalls.

7 Some relief may come from Congress this fall, when the Senate is expected to take up a bill that passed the House in July. The new legislation would require food companies to adopt stricter standards and undergo more frequent inspections. The bill would also give the government the authority to order recalls of tainted food.

8 "This is a good bill because it changes the Food and Drug Administration's whole approach. The F.D.A. can be more preventive to better ensure the food that arrives in our kitchens is safe to begin with," said Christopher A. Waldrop, director of the Food Policy Institute at the Consumer Federation of America, an advocacy group.

9 Until that time, safe food buying, handling and preparation is the best defense — and some juggling may be needed to avoid breaking the budget. Here, food safety experts offer advice on the most important, but still cost-conscious, ways to germ-proof your kitchen:

10 **Use Pasteurized Eggs.** If you are not willing to give up soft-boiled eggs or unbaked cookie dough, or you are using a recipe that calls for raw or partly cooked eggs, "pasteurized eggs are the easiest way to deal with the risk" said Dr. Michael Doyle with the Center for Food Safety at the University of Georgia.

11 Pasteurized eggs are heated in the shell to kill harmful bacteria and viruses but still taste and look like regular eggs. They are sold in most grocery stores and come with a red "P" stamped on the carton or on the eggs themselves.

12 **Prepare for sticker shock.** Pasteurized eggs can cost almost \$5 a dozen, compared with about \$4 for organic eggs and \$3 for regular. You can soften the budget blow by using pasteurized eggs only when the eggs will be raw or partly cooked in the finished dish, like classic Caesar salad, especially since eggs keep in the refrigerator for three to five weeks. "I buy farmer's

market eggs for hard-boiled and omelets, but I always have some pasteurized eggs on hand for baking because we all love to nibble the cookie dough," Ms. McCleary said.

13 **Wash all produce.** Even if you are going to peel a cucumber or melon, give it a good scrub so you don't transfer bacteria from the knife or peeler to the part you are going to eat. Most important, wash all lettuce, even if it comes in a bag that says triple washed. Better yet, skip the expensive bag and buy whole head lettuce, which is cheaper and less likely to be contaminated inside. Dr. Doyle recommends removing and discarding the outer leaves. After washing your hands, rinse the inner leaves thoroughly.

14 Invest in a salad spinner to make the job easier. There are lots of fancy models that cost \$30 or more, but you can buy a basic plastic model that will get the job done for about \$10.

15 **Learn to love well done.** Cooking thoroughly is the best way to eliminate harmful bacteria from meats and poultry. For a list of temperatures for various foods, check the Web site Foodsafety.gov, and don't rely on your eye alone. Pick up an inexpensive meat thermometer (no need for a digital model) next time you are in the grocery store.

16 **The Right Cutting Boards.** Always prepare raw meats and poultry on one cutting board, using another for vegetables. Clean both with warm soapy water after each use. Every few days sanitize your cutting boards with a solution of one tablespoon bleach in one gallon of water. Allow the cutting board to stand in the solution for several minutes, then rinse with clear water. More tips are available at the Department of Agriculture's Web site.

17 There is conflicting scientific evidence whether wood or plastic cutting boards are safer, said Nancy Donley, board president at Safe Tables Our Priority, a nonprofit advocacy group working to prevent foodborne illness. So use whichever you prefer or is on sale. The important thing is to keep boards clean and replace them when they become scored because pathogens can hide in the grooves.

18 **Understand "Organic."** "Organic doesn't necessarily mean safer," Ms. Donley said. "The organic label means grown without pesticides, it has nothing to do with bacteria and other pathogens." This became especially apparent in 2006, when some organic growers were involved in the recall of E. coli-tainted spinach. On the other hand, there is something reassuring about buying from a small organic farmer at a local stand or farmers' market, even if it does cost more. Like Ms. McCleary, most people can't help but feel that food grown and raised on a small farm is a lower risk.

19 Even so, remember that you need to handle anything organic — meat, poultry, produce — the same as nonorganic, said Shelley Feist, executive director of the Partnership for Food Safety Education, a coalition of industry and advocacy groups. You should still keep meats and vegetables separate to avoid cross-contamination, wash all produce thoroughly and wash platters and other surfaces that come into contact with raw meat and poultry. Thoroughly cook meats, poultry and eggs. For more safe handling and cooking tips, go to the partnership's Web site at www.fightbac.org.

20 **Be Smart About Leftovers.** Nothing suits a tight budget better than leftovers. But keeping food too long can pose a risk. "There's a myth out there that if leftovers smell O.K., they're O.K. to eat," Ms. Feist said. "But you can't smell, see or taste the bacteria that causes illness."

21 Keep in mind this advice from the Center for Science in the Public Interest: Don't leave food out longer than two hours, and use or freeze all leftovers within four days.

22 To avoid throwing out food (and wasting money), try to plan your week's menu and shopping list with leftovers in mind — roast chicken one day, chicken salad sandwiches the next — to make sure leftovers get used quickly.

23 Finally, keep an eye on an elderly relative's refrigerator. "The elderly are often likely to keep food too long," Ms. Feist said. "But they are more at risk of getting seriously ill from tainted food."