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FOOD SAFETY WHILE CAMPING

Camping is a great way to enjoy nature with family and friends. It is important to plan carefully to avoid food and water borne illness.

Cooking at Camp

After you have decided on a menu, you need to plan how you will prepare the food. Camping supply stores sell lightweight cooking gear that nest together, but you can also use aluminum foil wrap and pans for cooking. You'll need to decide in advance how you will cook. Many camping areas prohibit campfires. If you are bringing a camp stove, practice putting it together and lighting it before you pack. If you build a campfire, carefully extinguish the fire and dispose of the ashes before breaking camp. Likewise, leftover food should be burned, not dumped. Bring soap for hand and utensil washing. Pack garbage bags to dispose of any other trash, and carry it out with you.

Use a Food Thermometer

Another important piece of camping equipment is a *food thermometer*. If you are cooking meat or poultry on a portable stove or over a fire, you'll need a way to determine when it is done *and* safe to eat. Color is not a reliable indicator of doneness, and it can be especially tricky to tell the color of a food if you are cooking in a wooded area in the evening. Use a digital thermometer to measure the temperature. Digital thermometers register the temperature in the very tip of the probe, so the safety of thin foods -- such as hamburger patties and boneless chicken breasts -- as well as thicker foods can be determined. It is critical to use a food thermometer when cooking hamburgers. Ground beef may be contaminated with *E. coli* O157:H7, a particularly dangerous strain of bacteria. Illnesses have occurred even when ground beef patties were cooked until there was no visible pink. The only way to insure that ground beef patties are safely cooked is to use a food thermometer, and cook the patty until it reaches 160 degrees F. For chicken, cook breasts or cutlets to 170 degrees F; legs and thighs to 180 degrees F. Pork should be cooked to 160 degrees F. Heat hot dogs and any leftover food to 165 degrees F. Be sure to clean the thermometer between uses.

Keeping Food Cold

If you are "car camping" (driving to your site), you don't have quite as many restrictions. First, you will have the luxury of bringing a cooler. What kind of cooler? Plastic, fiberglass, or steel coolers are more durable and can take a lot of outdoor wear. They also have excellent "cold retention" power but, once filled; larger models may weigh 30 or 40 pounds. To keep foods cold, you'll need a cold source. A block of ice keeps longer than ice cubes. Before leaving home, freeze clean, empty milk cartons filled with water to make blocks of ice, or use frozen gel-packs. Fill the cooler with *cold* or *frozen* foods. Pack foods in reverse order. First foods packed should be the last foods used. (There is

one exception: pack raw meat or poultry *below* ready-to-eat foods to prevent raw meat or poultry juices from dripping onto the other foods.)

Take foods in the smallest quantity needed (e.g., a small jar of mayonnaise). In the car, put the ice chest in the air-conditioned passenger section, not in the trunk. At the campsite, insulate the cooler with a blanket, tarp, or poncho. When the camping trip is over, discard all perishable foods if there is no longer ice in the cooler or if the gel-pack is no longer frozen.

Safe Drinking Water

Bring bottled or tap water for drinking. It is not a good idea to depend on fresh water from a lake or stream for drinking, no matter how clean it appears. Some pathogens thrive in remote mountain lakes and streams; there is no way to determine what might have fallen into water upstream. Replenish your water supply from tested public systems when possible. For more information on purifying water from lakes and streams see “Food Safety While Hiking”.

Cleanup

When washing hands, dishes and cookware there are some rules to follow. Keep soapy used/unclean water out of rivers, lakes, streams, and springs, as it will pollute. If you use soap to clean your pots, wash the pots at the campsite, not at the water’s edge. Dump dirty water on dry ground, well away from fresh water. Some wilderness campers use baking soda to wash their utensils. Pack disposable wipes for hands and quick cleanups. Camping supply stores sell biodegradable camping soap in liquid and solid forms.

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