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Keeping food safe, particularly food prepared at home and brought to another location, is very important in reducing the risk of food borne illness outbreak. Most cases of food borne illness start in home kitchens, not because of the food but by how the food was prepared.

The familiar flu-like symptoms of nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, cramps, fever, headaches and muscle pain may not be the flu but a food borne illness. For some people—the very old, the very young, pregnant women and those who have chronic illness—a food borne illness can be life threatening.

Why is there a potential problem with potluck meals?

There's the potential for food handling errors at potluck meals. Some of the more obvious might include leaving perishable food at room temperature for too long, cooking large amounts of food ahead of time and cooling improperly, or failing to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Other factors to consider are: How was the dish prepared prior to the event? Were safe food handling practices adhered to?

What should I bring to the potluck to reduce the risks associated with food borne illness?

Here's what you should think about before you decide what to bring:

- If the item is perishable, will you be able to keep it cold or hot until it is served?
- Will you be able to heat the food or keep it warm once you arrive at the event?
- Will there be refrigeration available at the event so foods can be kept cold?

If you won't be able to keep cold foods cold or hot foods hot, consider bringing food that needs no refrigeration. Suggestions include: bread, desserts, chips, pretzels, whole fruit.

Four Simple Food Safety Rules to Remember:

- ✓ Keep hot food hot (above 140°F)
- ✓ Keep cold food cold (below 40°F)
- ✓ Keep hands, work surfaces and utensils clean
- ✓ Never leave perishable food out of the refrigerator over 2 hours!

How can I make sure the food I bring to a potluck event is safe?

Remember to Fight BAC!™ by following four rules when handling food:

CLEAN: Wash hands, utensils, and surfaces with hot soapy water before and after food preparation. Using a disinfectant cleaner or a mixture of bleach and water on surfaces and antibacterial soap on hands can provide some added protection.

SEPARATE: Never place cooked food on an unwashed plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood. Don't mix cooked food with old food.

COOK: Cook food to the proper internal temperature, which varies for different cuts of meat and poultry, and check for doneness with a food thermometer.

CHILL: Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared food, and leftovers within two hours. Make sure the refrigerator is set at no higher than 40°F and that the freezer unit is set at 0°F.

Food borne illnesses are most commonly caused by bacteria but can include viruses and parasites. These microorganisms can be present in food but can't be seen, smelled, or tasted. A more common term people use for food borne illness is food poisoning.

Perishable foods are those that require refrigeration. They include foods containing meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, egg or raw milk products. They also include processed foods labeled "keep refrigerated".