

Cross Contamination

Introduction

Cross contamination of food is a common factor in the cause of food borne illness. Foods can become contaminated by microorganisms (bacteria and viruses) from many different sources during the food preparation and storage process. Preventing cross contamination is one important step to help eliminate food borne illness.

What is Cross Contamination?

Cross contamination is the contamination of a food product from another source. There are three (3) main ways cross contamination can occur:

- ① Food to food
- ② Equipment to food
- ③ People to food

Food to Food

Food can become contaminated by bacteria from other foods. This type of cross contamination is especially dangerous if raw foods come into contact with cooked foods. Here are some examples of food-to-food cross contamination:

- In a refrigerator, meat drippings from raw meat stored on a top shelf might drip onto cooked vegetables placed on a lower shelf.
- Raw chicken placed on a grill touching a steak that is being cooked.

People to Food

People can also be a source of cross contamination to foods. Some examples are:

- Handling foods after using the toilet without properly washing your hands.
- Touching raw meats and then preparing vegetables without washing hands between tasks.
- Using an apron to wipe your hands between handling different foods, or wiping a counter with a towel and then using it to dry your hands.

Equipment to Food

Contamination can also be passed from kitchen equipment and utensils to food. This type of contamination occurs because the equipment or utensils were not properly cleaned and sanitized between each use. Some examples are:

- Using unclean equipment such as slicers, can openers, and utensils to prepare food.
- Using a cutting board and the same knife when cutting different types of foods, such as cutting raw chicken followed by salad preparation.
- Storing a cooked product, such as a sauce, in an unsanitized container that previously stored raw meat.

Preventing Cross Contamination

Follow these steps to prevent cross contamination and reduce hazards to food:

1. Wash your hands between handling different foods.
2. Wash and sanitize all equipment and utensils that come in contact with food.
3. Avoid touching your face, skin, and hair or wiping your hands on cleaning cloths.
4. Store foods properly by separating washed or prepared foods from unwashed or raw foods.
5. Try preparing each type of food at different times and then clean and sanitize food contact surfaces between each task.

For More Information

For more information on food protection, please contact the Environmental Health Division at (530) 621-5300 in Placerville or (530) 573-3450 in South Lake Tahoe.