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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

KEEPING FOOD COOL DURING CAMPING

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October 2002 FN/FS-250.11

Camping provides unique challenges in maintaining food safety. Keeping perishable food cold both during travel time and camping time requires planning. Eggs, meat, poultry, fish and milk and precooked foods need to be stored at temperatures under or close to 40˚F.

Micro-organisms begin to grow in food as it warms up. The warmer the food, the faster the microbial growth. During extended camp-outs, it is especially difficult to keep the food as cold as necessary.

Plan ahead so that you will have time to gather together what you want and freeze large containers of ice. Large blocks of ice will take longer to melt than the same amount of ice in smaller containers. Ice can be made in clean 1/2 gallon milk cartons, plastic buckets, or even partially filled zip-lock plastic bags. Be sure to leave expansion room when filling the containers. Plastic soda-pop bottles can also be used if only filled 2/3 full of water. Individual servings of juice in cartons can be frozen and used later.

Examples of ways of keeping food cold.

Ice that is loose in the ice chest cools food rapidly but can easily become contaminated from meat juices or hands reaching into the cooler. Ice can be safely used for drinks if kept in a container thus not in direct contact with the food.

Food preparation of perishable food done at home will result in fewer problems with clean-up and cross-contamination at the camping site. For example, hamburger patties can be shaped at home and put into a plastic bag. If they are to be used that day, refrigerate. If they will be used 2-3 days later, freeze and let thaw in the ice chest. This will keep them longer and provide additional cooling.

Keep the ice chest as cool as possible. The back seat can be cooler than the trunk of the car during travel. Extra insulation can be added to the ice chest by wrapping it in a beach towel or blanket. Keep the ice chest in the shade at the camp site.

Wrap cooler for extra insulation.

If the ice has melted and food no longer feels cold, toss it out. Whole fresh produce such as potatoes, onions, apples, and oranges are safe without cooling. Canned foods, dried foods, peanut butter, and jelly are always safe. Pickles, mustard, mayonnaise and catsup have a high enough acid content that it is not essential they be kept cold throughout the trip. On longer camping trips, plan on using nonperishable food towards the end of the trip just in case your ice is gone.

Protect your family from foodborne illness. To avoid cross contamination, put an extra plastic bag around meat and poultry items to catch any drip from the meat. If meat juices drip into the ice, don't use the ice in drinks. Keep hands and utensils clean. If clean water isn't available, consider bagging dirty dishes/equipment to wash with hot soapy water after you are home. Paper plates simplify clean-up.

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jack M. Payne, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University. (EP/DF/10-02)