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Living Well

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Keep *Listeria* Out of Your Kitchen

If you eat food contaminated with bacteria call *Listeria*, you could get so sick that you have to be hospitalized. And for certain vulnerable people, the illness could be fatal.

Unlike most bacteria, *Listeria* germs can grow and spread in the refrigerator. So, if you unknowingly refrigerate *Listeria*-contaminated food, the germs not only multiply at the cool temperature, they could contaminate your refrigerator and spread to other foods, increasing your likelihood that you and your family will become sick.

Those most at risk for listeriosis—the illness caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*—include pregnant women, older adults, and people with compromised immune systems and certain chronic medical conditions (such as cancer, diabetes, and kidney disease). In pregnant women, listeriosis can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, and serious illness or death in newborn babies.

Listeria has been linked to a variety of ready-of-eat foods, including deli meats, hot dogs, smoked seafood and stored-prepared deli-salads. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) recommends that consumers at risk for developing listeriosis to reheat hot dogs and lunch meats until steaming hot.

At-risk consumers are also advised to avoid unpasteurized milk and soft cheeses (e.g. brie and feta), unless they are made with pasteurized milk. As *Listeria* can sometimes be found in other foods, consumers are advised to wash all fruits and vegetables under running water

just before eating, cutting or cooking, even if planning to peel the produce first. To further protect yourself and your family from *Listeria*, consider the following tips:

***Keep refrigerated foods cold.** Keep your refrigerator at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or lower and the freezer at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or lower. Wrap or cover foods with a sheet of plastic wrap or foil or put food in plastic bags or clean covered containers before you place them in the refrigerator. Use precooked and ready-to-eat foods as soon as you can. The longer they are stored in the refrigerator, the more chance *Listeria* has to grow.

***Clean refrigerator regularly.** Clean up spills in your refrigerator right away—especially juices from hot dogs and lunch meat packages, raw meat, and raw poultry. Regularly clean the inside walls and shelves of your refrigerator with warm, soapy water.

***Clean hands and kitchen surfaces often.** Thoroughly wash food preparation surfaces with warm, soapy water. Cutting boards should be washed with warm, soapy water after each use. Nonporous cutting boards can be washed in a dishwasher. Dish cloths, towels, and cloth grocery bags should be washed often in the hot cycle of your washing machine. Remember to wash your hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before handling food.

As an added precaution, consumers can sanitize kitchen surfaces by combining 1 teaspoon of unscented bleach to 1 quart of water. After flooding the surface, let stand for 10 minutes. Rinse with clean water and let surfaces air dry or pat dry with fresh paper towels.

For more information, contact the Flint Hills Extension District office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491 or the office in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136.