Are you Playing Russian Roulette with your Food?

Foodborne illnesses affect the lives of thousands of Americans every year, and its effects can vary from down right discomfort to life threatening. Each year on the news we hear of outbreaks of diseases from various sections of our agricultural fields and restaurants, but by far the more common sources of food illnesses come from our own homes. An article by Liz Spittler in the ADA Times provides us with some chilling details.

In a study on Americans it was found that 65 percent of participants did not know what the proper temperature for a refrigerator should be. The maximum temperature a refrigerator should be is 40°F. In the same study it showed that only 15 percent of participants knew the current temperature of their refrigerator, and of those people only 1 percent had a thermometer in the refrigerator. The rest had confused the thermostat with the thermometer.

In order to prevent bacterial growth the temperature needs to be below 40°F. In the same study, refrigerators were checked in three places to see if they were cooling properly; of the refrigerators tested 76 percent were too warm in the back, 91 percent were too warm at the door, and 57 percent were too warm along the bottom shelf. This information, in fact, adds up when you consider that 34 percent of people had unsealed or uncovered food in their fridge, 29 percent had moldy or spoiled food in the fridge, and almost nobody (98 percent) dated their leftovers.

Swabs taken from the examined refrigerators indicate that the worst spot was the produce drawer. These are very threatening bacteria; greater than 30 percent of the bacteria collected had resistance to at least one antibiotic. This is partially caused by the fact that Americans do not seem to be cleaning the refrigerator out as much as they should. In this study 57 percent of the people said that they clean their fridge out once a week, 21 percent said that they empty their fridge, clean the interior, remove the bins
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June 2010

and shelves, and wash and dry them at least once every two weeks. Researchers question the actual
numbers being as high as reported.

Another common issue that caused problems was the seal on the door not functioning properly, even
on models less than ten years old. This caused temperature fluctuations and mold growth in the fridge.
And while that may be disconcerting, the study found that many Americans put things other than food
in their refrigerators. These non-food items ranged from batteries to airplane tickets, wet paint brushes
to bait worms.

Are you are asking yourself what you can do to not become one of these statistics? If so, let us help.
Keep your refrigerator set at 40°F or below at all times. Clean and sanitize shelves and drawers often to
eliminate bacteria growth. Check to make sure the refrigerator is in working order; check the water
filter, thermostat, door seal, drawers, and ice maker. Each of these areas can cause contamination of
food possibly leading to a foodborne illness. Lastly do not place house hold items in the refrigerator,
keep all non food items out! It seems like everyone has a bit of cleaning up to do. If you would like more
information on this topic please contact your local Texas AgriLife Extension Service County Extension
Agent at [Insert contact information here].