BACTERIA, SPINACH, . . . AND MORE

Spinach Advice – Fresh spinach has been in the news recently due to a multistate outbreak of food-borne illness caused by E. coli bacteria. By the time you read this newsletter, the tainted spinach should have been removed from our food supply. However, the situation could possibly happen again so be ready with this information:

1. Some media reports stated spinach could be made safe to eat by simply washing it. There was debate about the validity of this recommendation, and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service did not support this advice.

2. Several agencies advised that spinach could be safely eaten if properly cooked. North Carolina Extension did support this recommendation. However, the recommendation did NOT apply to individuals who are at high risk for food-borne illness - children, the elderly, pregnant women, and those with compromised immune systems such as people undergoing chemotherapy. These four groups always need to be more careful whatever the bacteria or its source.

3. If cooking procedures are recommended for a questionable food, you also need to be careful to prevent cross-contamination of that food with other foods and food-contact surfaces. Wash hands, utensils, and surfaces with hot, soapy water before and after handling the questionable food.

Pet Foods and Treats – These are often made with animal by-products and, thus, can carry salmonella bacteria. We humans can pick up the bacteria and become sick. Be sure to wash your hands after feeding pets or handling their chew toys and bowls.

Dirty Desktops – If you work in an office, you may have eaten lunch at your desk. Before your next desktop meal, consider this recent study by University of Arizona microbiologist Dr. Charles Gerba. He found an office desk may contain 400 times more germs than an office toilet seat. More specifically, a toilet seat had 49 germs per square inch compared to 20,961 germs for a desktop and 25,127 for a phone. Cleaning crews seldom touch office desks, phones, et cetera. Coughing and sneezing may increase the germ population.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you eat lunch in the bathroom, but do clean your desk with disinfecting wipes. Dr. Gerba's study found that the number of illness-causing microorganisms could be reduced up to 99.9% on office surfaces when they were cleaned daily with a disinfecting wipe. Follow usage directions for the brand of wipe you are using.

Remember that disinfecting wipes suitable for cleaning a desk are not meant for cleaning hands. Keep on hand a separate container of moist towelettes suitable for this purpose.
**FIBERIFIC PASTA**

As scientists identify more nutrients that are good for us, new “healthy” foods appear in our markets. One of the newest in the lineup is whole grain pasta.

Traditional pasta is made of refined durum wheat or semolina and loses its bran and germ during processing. Whole grain pasta has these two important parts. The bran (outer skin of a whole grain) and germ (embryo of the grain) carry healthful fats, protein, antioxidants, B vitamins, minerals, and fiber – all “good-for-us” stuff.

One of these minerals, magnesium, increases the body’s sensitivity to insulin, which may help lower the risk of diabetes. The antioxidant vitamin E, folate, and fiber may reduce the risk of heart disease. Fiber may also reduce harmful glucose, insulin, and fat levels in the blood. Also, fiber causes glucose to enter the blood stream more slowly so that blood sugar levels do not spike as dramatically after a meal.

Fiber is also kind to your waistline. A study done at Tufts University found that women whose diets are rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains weighed less and had less body fat than women who ate less fiber and more meat. In another study done at Louisiana State University, researchers found that the single greatest predictor of obesity in middle-aged women was lack of fiber in their diets. Simply put, fiber fills us up so we don’t eat as much, and we fill full faster.

So give whole grain pasta a try. Most brands have five to eight grams of fiber per two-ounce serving compared to only two grams in refined or “white” pasta.

And, FYI, whole grain pasta tastes just fine. In fact, some folks prefer its slightly nutty flavor. If your taste buds are skeptical, start off with a whole grain pasta blend which will have a milder flavor.

Because whole grain pasta does contain germ and bran, it cooks differently from regular pasta. For the best results when cooking whole grain pasta:

- **Do Not Overcook** – Overcooked whole grain pasta tends to be mushier than overcooked regular pasta, and that’s not a good thing. Follow the cooking times listed on the package. According to the Test Kitchens at *Cooking Light* magazine, these times are an accurate gage of cooking time.
- **Serve At Once** – Whole grain pasta tends to dry out quickly.
- **Sauce It Quick** – Toss these pastas in sauce as soon as possible after cooking to keep them moist and pliable.

**THE SEASONAL KITCHEN**

Fall means fresh apples for us. For best flavor, store apples separately in a cool, dry place as they can absorb flavors from other foods. Who wants to eat an apple that tastes like a rutabaga? Most apples will stay crisp in the refrigerator for up to six weeks.

**HEALTHY WEB SURFING**

Web surfing has become almost as popular as channel surfing. One possible catch is health information, but be sure you get reliable, quality information. Use these guidelines to evaluate health web sites.

- **Consider the Source** – Go with recognized authorities. Look for an “about us” page. Check to see who runs the site – government agency, nonprofit institution, professional organization, company selling its product, or an individual. There’s a big difference in a site that says, “I started this web site after I had a heart attack” and one that says, “This page on heart attacks was developed by health professionals at the American Heart Association.”
- **Focus on Quality** – Also check the “about us” page to see if the site has an editorial board. Is information reviewed before it is posted? Are board members experts on the subject? A site on osteoporosis whose medical advisory board is composed of lawyers and rocket scientists is probably not medically authoritative.
Be Skeptical – Of scientific breakthroughs and products that give quick and miraculous results. As with most things in life, if it's too good to be true, it's probably not true.

Look for Evidence – Rely on medical research, not opinion. All articles should have an author listed.

Check for Currency – Does the info have a current date? Check out a few links on the site; if there are a lot of broken links, the site is probably not kept up-to-date.

Follow the Money – Who is funding the site? Check to see if the site is funded by public funds, donations, or commercial advertising. Advertisements should be labeled as Advertisement, From Our Sponsor, et cetera.

Protect Your Privacy – Most folks like to keep their health info private. Look for a link that says “Privacy” or “Privacy Policy” and check it out. For example, if the site says, “We share information with companies that can provide you with useful products,” beware – you'll probably be flooded with ads for those products. That's not private.

What's Going On?

Heart Healthy Cooking Class:
Tuesday, October 24, 7 p.m. --
Features holiday dishes that are reduced in fat, sodium, or sugar. The program will be presented by me and dietitians from Southeastern Regional Medical Center and the Health Department. Come get some entertaining ideas for Thanksgiving and Christmas to help you make merry without blowing your diet. The class will be held at the Extension Center, located in the O. P. Owens Agriculture Center, Highway 72 West, Lumberton.

There is a $6 fee payable at the door, but preregistration is required so adequate food may be prepared. To reserve your space, call me at 671-3276 by Friday, October 20. Individuals with disabilities and/or special needs interested in this meeting should call so proper arrangements can be made.

NOTE – THIS CLASS IS ON A TUESDAY, NOT MONDAY, AS IT HAS BEEN IN THE PAST!

Asthma Coalition: A group of health-related agencies and interested citizens are beginning an asthma coalition for Robeson County to help educate people about asthma triggers and how to control asthma. If you're interested in joining this group, call me at 671-3276. We'd love to have you; be part of the solution.

Meth Labs: If you own rental property or farm land, you need to know how to recognize meth “labs.” Methamphetamine (illegal drug) is a growing problem in our county. People who make this drug often set up a “lab” and produce it in abandoned barns or houses out in the country; you may have such a site on your property – if you recognize it. To receive a handout on recognizing meth labs or to arrange a program for a group, call me at 671-3276.

The use of brand names in this newsletter does not imply endorsement of the products or services named or criticism of similar ones not mentioned.

Susan Noble

Susan Noble
Extension Agent
Family and Consumer Sciences

SN/dp

Helping People Put Knowledge to Work