



March 16, 2007
NEWS RELEASE

Contact: Pamela Davenport
(801) 468-2757
(801) 209-0986

Can Your Kitchen Pass a Health Department Food Safety Inspection? *Health Inspector Shares Tips to Prevent Foodborne Illness at Home*

(Salt Lake County) – They’ve seen it all. Insects, rodent droppings, cooked rice held at 60 degrees Fahrenheit for several hours, and cooks “taste-testing” your meal with their fingers. Dirty floors, dirty counters, dirty cooking utensils. Employees who don’t wash their hands after using the rest room, and managers who require food handlers to work even when they’re sick. With over 3,500 restaurants in Salt Lake County and a total of nearly 9,000 inspections each year, as health inspectors for the Salt Lake Valley Health Department (SLVHD) Food Protection Bureau, they’ve seen it all.

“Yes, as a food inspector, we see things that would probably upset the average person to hear about,” explains Jeffrey Oaks, SLVHD Food Protection Supervisor. “But what’s really surprising is that many of those same people do things in their own kitchen that, if done in a public restaurant would cause the health department to close the facility immediately.”

At the SLVHD health officials believe that, in addition to enforcing regulations, a food inspector’s role is to also educate restaurant employees and help correct behavior that could potentially cause foodborne illness. Punitive action such as closing a restaurant comes only if an inspector sees something that is an imminent health risk to the public.

But what about an individual’s own, private kitchen? Are there imminent health risks there?

Oaks says that recent media attention on foodborne illnesses has created a strong awareness of things individuals can do at home to keep food safe and protect their families. Most seem to know the basics like washing your hands often, cooking foods to a specific temperature, and making sure hot foods stay hot and cold foods stay cold.

But, Oaks says, there are some things the general public may not think of that could cause problems at home – things that food inspectors look for to determine if a food establishment is a health risk. During a food safety inspection, one ‘critical violation’ that could lead to a forced closure is the storage of raw meats over ready-to-eat foods such as raw vegetables. This practice allows uncooked meat juices to drip onto other foods and cause potential contamination like *salmonella* or *E. coli*.

“In my house, we have two vegetable crisper drawers down at the bottom of the refrigerator and one is designated just for raw meats,” Oaks explains. “We never allow raw meat, poultry and fish to come in contact with other foods.”

The health department also says that cooked foods such as rice, potatoes, pasta, or beans need special attention due to bacteria called *Bacillus cereus* that is sometimes dormant in the uncooked product

but is activated when it's cooked and left at room temperature too long. Food inspectors say the best way to eliminate this potential risk is to refrigerate any leftovers as soon as possible.

“We require restaurants to cool and store these types of foods in shallow containers, which allows the product to cool more quickly,” Oaks continued. “If we find a restaurant where this rule isn't being followed, it may result in the destruction of hundreds of pounds of food.”

And speaking of refrigerators, Oaks says that a very basic food safety concept, keeping your refrigerator at or below 41 degrees Fahrenheit, is very often overlooked. “Refrigerators should stay at 41 F or less. However, recent surveys show that, in many households, the refrigerator temperature is above 50 degrees.”

Oaks advice: Measure the temperature with a thermometer and, if needed, adjust the refrigerator's temperature control dial.

“A temperature of 41 F or less is important because it slows the growth of most bacteria,” he continues. “The temperature won't kill the bacteria, but it will keep them from multiplying, and the fewer there are, the less likely you are to get sick.” Freezing at zero F or less stops bacterial growth, although it won't kill bacteria already present.

For more food safety information, or to take the “Can Your Kitchen Pass the Food Safety Test?” visit the SLVHD website at <http://www.slvhealth.org/eh/food/foodquiz.html>.

#####