K-State food safety expert addresses hazards in the home kitchen

Knowing potential pitfalls can help keep family safe, Blakeslee says

MANHATTAN, Kan. – Kansas State University food scientist Karen Blakeslee believes that knowledge inspires confidence. So, she says, knowing where the potential pitfalls are in the home kitchen can go a long way toward keeping the family’s food safe.

“When you eat at a restaurant, you want to feel confident that they are serving you safe food,” Blakeslee said, “and you want to do the same thing at home.”

She said food safety hazards often fall into three categories: physical, chemical and biological.

Physical

“When you store your food in your cabinets, refrigerator or freezer, make sure the package that you’re storing food in is appropriate for the type of storage,” Blakeslee said.

Many shelf stable foods – pasta and flour among them – come in flexible plastic or paper packages, which are more susceptible to breaking or tearing. “It’s a good idea to transfer those types of foods into another container, such as glass jars or something that will seal well,” Blakeslee said. “Using sturdy containers can help reduce problems with insects invading these foods. If flour is seldom used or you want to extend its storage time, freeze it for later use.”

Freezer foods should be stored in glass or freezer-safe plastic containers that hold up to very cold temperatures. Even foods that will be in the refrigerator for a period of time should be in sturdy packages to prevent breaking when those foods are shifted around.

“Outside of storage, if you see a package or glass that is broken, clean it up well with a vacuum cleaner and broom,” Blakeslee said. “You don’t want to leave little pieces that can get into other foods.”

Blakeslee also suggests checking to make sure handles are tight on pots and pans. “You don’t want those handles to fall off, especially if you’re handling a hot pan of food.”
Chemical

Kitchen chemicals, such as dish soaps, dishwasher detergent and other cleaning supplies should be kept in an area well away from food. “Generally, underneath your sink is a good place,” Blakeslee said.

“Keep those products separate from your food. If a package containing those cleaners would break, it could spill on your food and you may not know it.”

“Be sure to use cookware and utensils that are designated for food use. Some metals, such as pewter, zinc, copper and some types of pottery are not food safe. Some foods that come in contact with these types of cookware can allow the chemical to leach into the food.”

Biological

Biological food hazards include yeast, mold and microorganisms such as Listeria, E. coli and Salmonella. Check for damaged packages, which can encourage the growth of bacteria. Listeria can grow in refrigerated conditions, Blakeslee said.

“If a canned food is dented, it can compromise the seal on that can,” she said. “And if bacteria is present, it can grow under room temperature conditions.”

Blakeslee added that if foods spill in the refrigerator, clean them up right away. And, she adds, “periodically clean the fruit, vegetable and meat drawers; not just once a year. Keeping those storage areas clean can go a long way toward having safe food to eat.”

Another hazard not always considered is food allergens. If someone in the house is known to have a particular allergy, it’s best to keep any food containing that allergen far away from the food that the individual might eat, according to Blakeslee.

“It takes planning to store foods in an area where they won’t affect other foods,” she said.

When shopping, read package labels to know which foods might contain certain allergens.

Blakeslee encourages consumers to pay attention to food safety recall notices, often reported by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. “If you have food involved in a recall, return it to the store for a refund or throw it away,” she said. “Do not eat the recalled food.”

Blakeslee, who also is coordinator of K-State’s Rapid Response Center for food science, publishes a monthly newsletter, called You Asked It!, in which she addresses consumer’s food safety questions and related topics.

More food safety information also is available from K-State Research and Extension, or from local extension offices in Kansas.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Rapid Response Center for food science (Kansas State University), https://www.rrc.k-state.edu

You Asked It! newsletter, https://www.rrc.k-state.edu/newsletter/index.html


K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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