

Eating Safely for Two: Preventing Foodborne Illness During Pregnancy

Handling foods safely will help keep you healthy during pregnancy

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Food safety is important for everyone. But it is especially important to pregnant women, their unborn children, and others with weakened or developing immune systems. When women become pregnant, their bodies naturally undergo hormonal changes, some of which also change their immune systems, making them more susceptible to foodborne pathogens, a risk that is also shared with their fetuses. Pregnant women with a foodborne illness can cause serious harm, or even death, to an unborn baby. Complications related to foodborne illnesses include premature birth, meningitis, mental retardation, sepsis, stillbirth, and spontaneous miscarriage.

Although there is no “zero-risk” approach you can take to avoid foodborne illnesses, your medical risks can be greatly lessened by practicing certain guidelines when preparing and consuming foods during this time.

Avoid Certain Foods and Handle Others with Extra Care

Stop Foodborne Illness, the national advocacy group that educates consumers on practicing food safety and minimizing the risks foodborne illness (stopfoodborneillness.org), has some good advice on eating safely for two during pregnancy. No matter how strong your cravings are, avoiding these foods, which can cause havoc and be dangerous during pregnancy, is a good place to start:

- Raw (unpasteurized) milk and milk products. If the label doesn't explicitly indicate that cheeses such as Brie, Camembert, Roquefort, Feta, and Mexican-style cheeses such as queso fresco are pasteurized, it is best to avoid them. This includes samples!
- Raw fish or shellfish, such as oysters, clams, mussels and scallops. Including refrigerated, smoked seafood, and meat spreads or pâté. Sorry, no sushi!
- Foods containing raw or lightly cooked eggs, including salad dressings, cookie and cake batters, sauces, homemade ice cream, unpasteurized eggnog and meringues, and runny eggs. Pasteurized in-shell eggs and liquid egg products are much safer.
- Raw and rare (undercooked) meats -- ground, chopped or shaped meats. This includes poultry, and fish.
- Commercially made, ready-to-eat, prepackaged salads such as ham, tuna, pasta or potato. Avoid seafood salad. There are too many unknown variables to consider.
- Raw sprouts of all kinds.
- Unpasteurized fruit or vegetable juices, including ciders. When buying smoothies, ask if the juice they're using is pasteurized. If not, or if they don't know, it is best to avoid it.
- Unwashed produce. Choose fresh produce that looks undamaged, washing all fruits and veggies thoroughly in drinkable water, including citrus, melons, and other produce for which the rind or peel will be removed.

- Salad bars and smorgasbords. With all that is happening inside and out, it's understandable that you'd want a meal you didn't have to prepare. However, the old adage is true -- an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

There are proven, safe ways to handle and prepare foods, and if you follow our Stop Foodborne Illness guidelines, your chances of contracting a foodborne illness such as Listeria, E. coli and Salmonella, are greatly reduced.

Reheat Until Steaming, or Do Not Eat at All

According to Deirdre Schlunegger, CEO of Stop Foodborne Illness, "To prevent foodborne illness, food items like leftovers, hot dogs, ready-to-eat meats including ham, bologna and other lunchmeats (cold cuts), fermented and dry sausage and other deli-style meat and poultry products should be heated until steaming, or avoided, during pregnancy."

Take Special Care When Cooking and Eating

During these months of big changes, one finds themselves wanting some tasks to be easier. Preparing and consuming foods can be one of them, but don't give in. Prioritizing food safety decreases the risk of contamination and illness!

Wash your hands often, for at least 20 seconds (Twice through the Happy Birthday song). Use warm, soapy water before and after handling food, and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, handling pets and pet foods. Limit the use of antacids. Ingestion of antacids increases the risk of foodborne illness because it reduces the stomach acids which normally control bacteria.

When dining out, be particularly cautious about the establishment's food safety track records. State public health websites will have information regarding inspections. Avoid places that appear unsanitary. Always follow safe food handling practices: Clean, Separate, Cook, Chill. Wash hands and surfaces often, don't cross contaminate, cook to a safe temperature, and refrigerate promptly.

For more specific information and steps you can take to minimize your risks from foodborne disease, see Stop's website at www.stopfoodborneillness.org.

Be Alert for Symptoms of Foodborne Illness During Pregnancy

Symptoms of foodborne illness may be less severe and more difficult to detect in pregnant women because they may be confused with normal symptoms of pregnancy, such as morning sickness, or even a mild flu. Symptoms of foodborne illness can appear right away or up to several weeks after eating a contaminated food. Because the consequences are dire, if you have even fleeting symptoms resembling these listed, contact your doctor immediately.

Symptoms to watch for:

- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Neck ache
- Headache
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal cramps
- Lymph node enlargement

About Stop Foodborne Illness

Stop Foodborne Illness is a national nonprofit, public health organization dedicated to preventing illness and death from foodborne pathogens by promoting sound food safety policy and best practices, building public awareness, and assisting those impacted by foodborne illness.

For more food safety tips please visit www.Stopfoodborneillness.org/awareness/. If you think you have been sickened from food, contact your local health professional. You may subscribe to receive Stop Foodborne Illness e-Alerts and eNews here: www.Stopfoodborneillness.org/take-action/sign-up-for-e-alerts/.

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For questions and personal assistance, please contact Stanley Rutledge, Community Coordinator, by e-mail here or by telephone at 773-269-6555 x7.