

Tailgating Touchdowns

By: Lois A. Ahrens

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Fall, football and food signal tailgating for many sports fans around the country. Keeping food safe scores extra points and gives you the win over a tricky opponent: food poisoning.

Pre-game warm up

Spend time planning your tailgating experience to avoid a dangerous food fumble at the event.

Create a “game day kit” with supplies and utensils necessary for every game. Include moist towelettes for hand-wiping and cleaning surfaces, color-coded plates and utensils to keep raw and cooked foods separate, a meat thermometer, ice or gel packs and well-insulated coolers.

Defrost meats in the refrigerator or microwave, not at the tailgate. Use separate cutting boards for preparing raw meat or poultry and ready-to-eat foods like salads and fruits to prevent cross contamination. Package raw, thawed or marinating meats in tightly sealed, disposable plastic bags and keep in the refrigerator until it is time to leave for the tailgate. Also, chill side dishes and salads, such as potato and pasta salads, well ahead of time.

Remember to have plenty of ice on hand.

Game day action

A strong defense gives you good field position to tackle food-borne bacteria.

Just before leaving home, fill coolers with several inches of ice to keep temperatures below 40 degrees F. Use a separate cooler for meat products to prevent juices from contaminating other items.

Before grilling, discard sauce used to marinate raw meat and plastic bags used to hold meat. Then, fully cook the meat at the tailgate. Partially cooking ahead of time allows bacteria to multiply to a point they cannot be destroyed by subsequent cooking.

Here’s where the meat thermometer comes in handy. Cook hamburgers and bratwurst to 160 degrees F; chicken breasts and ground poultry to 165 degrees F; pork cuts to 160 degrees F.

Hold hot food, such as soups, in insulated containers and keep covers on when not serving.

The basic game plan is to keep hot food hot and cold food cold. Bacteria multiply quickly in the “danger” zone of 40 to 140 degrees F. Never leave food out for more than two hours or more than one hour if the outside temperature is 90 degrees F or hotter.

Handle carry-out and pre-prepared foods, such as luncheon meat, cooked meat or salads brought by guests, with the same food safety practices as food brought from home. Then, wrap and stow leftovers in ice-filled coolers before entering the game.

Post-game

Make your post-game wrap-up an automatic completion. Discard leftovers that are not ice cold at 40 degrees F or colder.

Non-perishable snack foods such as nuts, dried and fresh fruit, popcorn, whole grain crackers and chips are great to serve now.

Clean food thermometers, non-disposable plates and utensils before packing up for the day.

It takes a team effort to keep food safe at tailgates. It is worth it to increase your winning percentage and ensure a fun and successful football season.

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