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EDITOR'S PICK

Public Health: Bad fajita -- tips for preventing foodborne illnesses

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Remember that Tupperware of leftover white chicken chili you made last week? You sniff it, you eyeball it, you stick your finger in it. Hmmm?

Time flies when you're working two jobs and trying to put dinner on the table. Sure, maybe you forgot to put the potato salad away after lunch, but with inflation and the cost of food the way it is, who wants to waste a perfectly good serving of potato glue?

And what about that cheese? Yes, there is a small amount of mold on the surface, but the rest of it seems fine.

You're tired and you're hungry. Sure, the chicken is a bit pink, but does it really matter?

And what about expiration dates; can you really trust them?

So many questions.



Amber Johnson

Photo provided

Foodborne illness and user error

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates 48 million people get sick from foodborne illness each year. That is 1 in 6 Americans, making it an all-too-common condition.

The most common food poisoning symptoms include diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, stomach pain, fever, headache and weakness. While most people will recover quickly with the aid of home remedies and over-the-counter medications, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die from foodborne disease each year in the United States.

Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of public health sanitarians, rarely do we have to worry about buying and consuming contaminated food from stores and restaurants. Sanitation systems are in place to protect the public from contaminated food and water; one of the many marvels of public health in action. Should a foodborne illness leak into the public supply chain, investigations are swift, food recalls are issued and restaurants shut down. For local restaurant inspection reports, visit the LCPH website at **www.lccountymt.gov/Government/Public-Health/Restaurant-Inspection-Reports**.

Truth is, most food poisoning happens at home, often because of user error.

Tips and tricks of food safety

To not be the anti-hero in your own kitchen, here are some simple tips and tricks to keep yourself and your family safe from foodborne illness this holiday season and throughout the year.

- Wash your hands with soap before, during and after food preparation and consumption. Wash them again, especially after handling raw meat or eggs.
- Wash your utensils, cutting boards and countertops with hot and soapy water and/or disinfectant spray after food preparation. Make sure the disinfectant is safe for food contact surfaces if used on utensils and cutting boards.

- Thoroughly rinse fruits and vegetables under running water.
- Separate raw meat and eggs from ready-to-eat foods – in a shopping bag or the fridge. (Ready-to-eat foods are foods that will not be further cooked, such as bread, deli sandwiches, salad or fruit.)
- Store raw meat, poultry and seafood in sealed containers on the lowest shelf so the juices don't leak onto other foods in the fridge.
- Use a specific cutting board for raw proteins and another for produce, bread and other food that don't need to be cooked.
- Leftovers should be enjoyed within four days of storage.
- Plan ahead. When you plan your meals, factoring in for leftovers, you can both save money and protect yourself from the bellyache of fajitas-gone-bad.
- Don't wash your chicken. Washing raw proteins can spread germs to other foods, the sink and the counter.
- All poultry, including chicken and turkey, must be cooked to an internal temperature of 165 degrees.
- Chill promptly. Never leave perishable food out for more than two hours; one hour only if the temperature is 90 degrees or hotter. Put food into smaller containers so it cools quickly.
- Keep your refrigerator at 40 degrees or below and your freezer at 0 degrees or below.

As for that cheese? Well, experts agree that if you cut an inch off the moldy top of hard and semi-hard cheeses like cheddar and parmesan, you're probably fine. Moldy soft cheeses, however, should be tossed.

And what about those expiration dates? Many expiration dates are not indicators of food safety, but of food quality. Pay much closer attention to the expiration dates on perishable foods like meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products. Dry goods and canned goods are more mysterious and much less troublesome. If a can or jar is bulging, throw it out. Regardless of the food product, if it smells bad, looks bad and tastes bad – don't eat it!

While Tay Tay has never written a song about food poisoning, local Helena band South Central has. Titled “Bad Fajita”, it’s a catchy tune about the perils of fajitas-gone-bad. Find it on Spotify and let it inspire your sanitary adventures in the kitchen.

And if you have more questions about food safety, please visit **foodsafety.gov** and nerd out.

A hunger-free community

Finally, for many individuals and families in our community, food insecurity is no joke. And neither is the cost of groceries. No one in our community should feel like they need to consume expired and potentially contaminated leftovers for fear of wasting food or money.

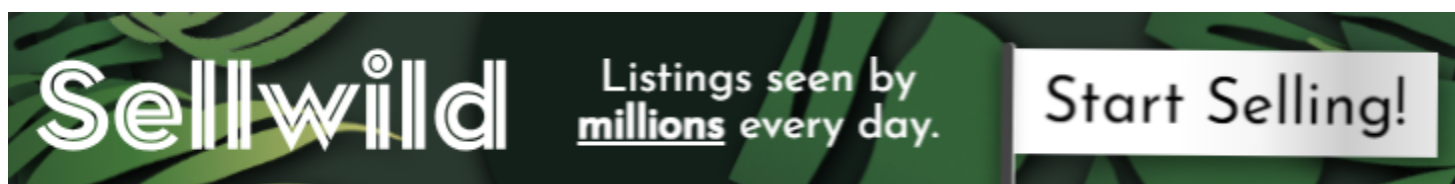
Helena Food Share just opened a beautiful new market and facility at 1280 Boulder Ave. There are no income requirements. If you and your family need food, visit the market during operating hours to shop weekly for produce, dairy, frozen products, breads and more.

You can contact the Helena Food Share team at 406-443-3663 for more information.

And if you have food and resources to share, please consider donating to Helena Food Share. Visit their website at **helenafoodshare.org/donate** for more details. Together, we can create a hunger-free community.

We wish you a happy holiday season filled with delicious, nutritious, plentiful and safe food.

Amber Johnson is the communications specialist for Lewis and Clark Public Health.





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