Food safety: Why older people face more risk

I often hear that the elderly are more at risk from foodborne illness. Is that true, and if so, why?

It is true that older adults are at more risk for serious complications from foodborne illness. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people 65 years or older experience just 13 percent of all foodborne illness infections but account for 24 percent of hospitalizations and 57 percent of deaths.

What makes older people more susceptible to these complications? The U.S. Food and Drug Administration offers an explanation in its Food Safety for Older Adults guide:

- As we get older, our liver and kidneys may not rid the body of toxins as readily.
- The stomach and intestinal tract may hold onto foods for longer periods, offering foodborne pathogens more opportunity to cause problems.
- Our immune system tends to become more sluggish as we age, reducing the body’s ability to fight off harmful bacteria or other pathogens.
- Older people are more likely to have a chronic condition, such as diabetes, arthritis, cancer or cardiovascular disease, and are also more likely to regularly take medications. Both chronic conditions and some medications can further weaken the immune system.
- As we age, our senses of smell and taste may wane, reducing our ability to spot warning signs of food that has gone bad. However, it’s important to note that many foodborne disease pathogens don’t provide such telltale cues anyway.

With all this in mind, it’s important for everyone 65 and older — and those who serve them — to take basic food safety precautions, including:

- Wash hands and surfaces often. This helps prevent the spread of bacteria.
- Prevent cross-contamination. Separate raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs from other foods. Consider using separate cutting boards for raw foods and foods that are ready to eat.
- Cook foods to safe temperatures. Use a food thermometer to be sure you cook poultry (including ground chicken or turkey) to 165 degrees F, as well as hot dogs, soups, gravy, sauces and leftovers; ground beef to 160 F; seafood to 145 F; and beef, lamb, pork and veal steaks, roasts, and chops to 145 F with an additional 3-minute rest time after removing them from the heat.
- Refrigerate food promptly — within two hours of cooking or purchasing.
- Avoid risky foods such as soft cheeses made with raw milk; unpasteurized (raw) milk; raw or undercooked eggs; raw meat; raw poultry; raw fish; raw shellfish and their juices; and luncheon meats and deli-type salads (without added preservatives) prepared on site in a deli-type establishment.

For more food safety information related to older adults, see the FDA’s guide at [bit.ly/fdsafeolderadults](http://bit.ly/fdsafeolderadults).