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EXPERTS WARN INCREASING NUMBER OF AUSTRALIANS AT RISK FROM FOOD POISONING:

AUSTRALIAN FOOD SAFETY WEEK 7-13 NOVEMBER 2011

The number of vulnerable Australians at most risk from food poisoning is increasing, according to Australian Bureau of Statistics' data.

Food Safety Information Council Chairman, Dr Michael Eyles, says that while food poisoning is an unpleasant experience for most of the population, for unborn babies, young children, people mid-60s or older and those who have poor immunity because of illness or medical treatment, the outcome can be life-threatening.

"The theme of Australian Food Safety Week this year is vulnerable populations, because these groups are growing rapidly. This increases the likelihood that either we may be in the vulnerable group ourselves or we may be preparing food for someone who is. In either case we must be extra cautious with our choice of foods and how we handle foods to avoid food poisoning." Dr Eyles says.

According to [Australian Bureau of Statistics' data](#), in the past 20 years the number of Australians over 63 years old increased by 13.6%, and those over 85 years old increased by 170.6% to 398,200. In just the 12 months to 30 June 2010, the number of children aged 0-4 years increased by 38,500.

Dr Eyles says those Australians covered by these statistics are particularly vulnerable to food poisoning for valid scientific reasons including:

- No matter how fit and healthy, those **older than mid-60s** have less resistance to food poisoning bacteria.
- **People suffering an illness or undergoing medical treatment**, such as chemotherapy, are likely to have compromised immune systems putting them at particular risk from food poisoning.
- **Young children** do not have fully developed immune systems until around 8 years of age.
- **Pregnant women** have reduced immune systems and their unborn babies are at particular risk of *Listeria* infection.

"Following the Council's basic food safety tips is always a good idea for everyone, but for those in the vulnerable populations it may be a matter of life or death," Dr Eyles says.

SPECIFIC FOOD SAFETY TIPS FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS ARE:

- CHOOSE:** Those with weakened immune systems, pregnant women and their unborn babies and older people are at risk from *Listeria* infection, which only causes a mild illness in the general population but can be fatal for the vulnerable. The best way to avoid *Listeria* infection is to avoid the foods *Listeria* bacteria can grow in: soft cheeses, pâté, cold sliced cooked meats, chilled ready to eat seafood like cooked prawns, soft serve ice cream, store bought vegetable and fruit salads. Don't use cracked or dirty eggs, or any food after its use by date.
- CLEAN:** Scrupulously wash your hands in running water with soap for 20 seconds and then dry on a clean towel, before handling food, after handling high risk food such as meat or poultry and after using the toilet or changing babies' nappies. Ensure your food preparation area, utensils and feeding containers such as baby bottles and teats are absolutely clean. Wash chopping boards and knives with hot, soapy water, rinse with running water, and dry thoroughly to avoid cross contamination particularly when preparing raw meat or poultry and then salad vegetables and other foods which won't be cooked. Ensure everyone washes their hands properly before eating. Don't prepare food for others if you have vomiting, diarrhoea or may have food poisoning or if you have exposed infected wounds or sores on your hands.
- COOK:** Make sure food, especially poultry and minced meat or sausages, is cooked all the way through until juices run clear. Invest in a meat thermometer and check the thickest part of the meat reaches a safe temperature – over 70 degrees for minced meat and sausages, and over 74 degrees for poultry. The surface of fish and whole red meats is where bacteria lurks – ensure entire surface is cooked well. Eggs and egg containing dishes should be well cooked for at risk groups. Particular care should also be paid when making purees to ensure they are cooked thoroughly and refrigerated promptly and only used when fresh – two to three days. When preparing packaged food including baby formula and nutrition supplements, follow the manufacturers' instructions, taking specific care with temperature control.
- CHILL:** Make sure perishable food is refrigerated at 5 degrees Celsius or below – use a fridge thermometer.
- SEPARATE:** Make sure that raw meat or poultry doesn't come in contact with foods that won't be cooked again such as desserts, fruits and salads. Cover food in the fridge and store raw meat and poultry at the bottom of the fridge.

AUSTRALIAN FOOD SAFETY WEEK is the major activity of the Food Safety Information Council which aims to address the estimated 5.4 million cases of food borne illness in Australia each year.

Food poisoning results, on average, in 120 deaths, 1.2 million visits to doctors, 300,000 prescriptions for antibiotics, and 2.1 million days of lost work each year. The estimated annual cost of food poisoning in Australia is \$1.25 billion.

The Food Safety Information Council is Australia's leading disseminator of consumer-targeted food safety information. It is a non-profit entity supported by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing, state and territory health and food safety agencies, local government, and leading professional, industry and community organisations.

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NOTE: Pronunciation of 'Eyles': as for 'British Isles', or 'supermarket aisles'.

FURTHER INFORMATION: www.foodsafety.asn.au

Aged Care <http://www.foodsafety.asn.au/factsheets/doyoucookandbringfoo2743.cfm>

Listeria and pregnancy brochure <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/srcfiles/Listeria.pdf>

Listeria and people at risk

<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/scienceandeducation/factsheets/factsheets2010/listeriaandfoodtheri4976.cfm>

Low immunity: <http://www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au/consumers/life-events-and-food/low-immunity/low-immunity/>

Listeria video

<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/scienceandeducation/learningcentre/pregnancyvideos/listeriaa.cfm>