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BE A MASTER MYTHBUSTER DURING FOOD SAFETY WEEK 2010

Australians are asked to question the sometimes dodgy advice their food handling techniques are based on and learn what really works when it comes to avoiding nasty food bugs.

Myths and Mastery is the theme for Australian Food Safety Week 2010, an annual, nationwide food safety education campaign organised by the Food Safety Information Council. The campaign begins today (8 November) and runs until Sunday (14 November).

Council Chairman, Dr Michael Eyles, says during Food Safety Week people are encouraged to question some of the food safety tips they've received from family and friends and always believed correct.

"Many people learn food safety myths from family and friends who always mean well, but often the advice they give is wrong and sometimes even dangerous," he says.

"A popular misconception is that it's safe to defrost food on the bench is one example of a food safety myth that can lead to people becoming very ill.

"Another is that leftovers have to be cold before they go in the fridge. This one should have gone out when the iceman stopped delivering ice to cool the forerunner of the fridge, the ice chest.

"Other people are well educated on the risks and they've mastered challenging food safety situations with innovative solutions such as shopping with a cooler bag, or making sure perishables including meats, chicken and fish are last on the shopping list.

"Whether you're a master chef or a master at microwave dinners, it's a good idea to know what will and won't help you and your family avoids becoming one of the estimated 5.4 million Australian who suffer food poisoning annually" says Dr Eyles.

During Australian Food Safety Week, local councils, schools, community groups and many other organisations are running fun activities all over the country to help debunk the myths and uncover the masters of food safety.

Master Chef 2010, winner Adam Liaw, and runner-up Callum Hann, will be sharing their cooking secrets and some simple safety tips through a radio campaign that will air throughout Australia during the week.

YOUR STORY WANTED: The Food Safety Information Council is inviting people to send in their myths: questionable food safety advice they've grown up with or heard from other people.

The Council would also like to hear people's stories of mastery: great solutions to food safety challenges that smart thinking has overcome.

Prizes are on offer for the best stories on myths or mastery. Send your story to foodsafety@ozemail.com.au before 30 November. Some common myths and mastery tips are below to help you get started.

More information: Australian Food Safety Week 2010 visit: www.foodsafety.asn.au/foodsafetyweek/

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COMMON FOOD SAFETY MYTHS

Loading the fridge up with food and drinks will help it to maintain a cold temperature

The opposite is true: overloading the fridge reduces airflow so the fridge has to work much harder to keep its contents cold. Between 5°C and 60°C food poisoning bugs start to multiply so it can be dangerous if your fridge doesn't keep food below 5°C. After being between 5°C and 60°C for more than two hours, the safety of some perishable foods will be questionable. If foods are in the danger zone for more than four hours it's best to throw it away.

The best way to defrost food is to leave it on the bench

It can take hours for food to defrost and while the centre stays frozen the outside of the food can reach room temperature much more quickly.

For example, if a chicken is defrosted on the bench top the raw meat on the outside can be sitting for hours at a dangerous temperature while the interior slowly defrosts. By the time the whole chicken has defrosted, the outside flesh could be crawling with bugs like Salmonella or Campylobacter. These microorganisms can cause the whole family to be sick with vomiting, diarrhoea and stomach cramps. The safest way to defrost food is in the fridge or the microwave.

Marinade makes a great sauce.

Only if you cook it first!

Pouring the uncooked marinade from chicken, meat or fish, over the cooked meal is totally wrong. Raw marinade contains raw meat, chicken and fish juices which will have leached out during the marinating time. Marinade can become a delicious sauce if cooked well. This also helps to increase the deliciousness by reducing it to a true sauce, rather than a thin, cold, potentially poisonous add on to a great bbq.

TIPS FOR FOOD SAFETY MASTERY

Use shallow containers for leftovers

Cooking lots of food in advance can be a great way to save time and money, but cooked leftovers need to be refrigerated in shallow containers as soon as they stop steaming. If they're being put in the freezer, it's helpful to write the date on the outside of the container. Many freezers have guidelines on their doors to indicate how long different types of frozen food can be stored.

Take a cooler bag shopping

The more time that perishable food spends between 5°C and 60°C, the more time food bugs have to multiply. Taking a cooler bag to the shops can help to keep perishable food at a safe temperature while shopping, checking out and driving home.

Use smaller saucepans

If cooking for a smaller number of people than you've been used to, use the smaller saucepans. Cooking larger meals than necessary can result in lots of leftovers which can mean more left overs in the fridge for greater than the optimum time. Smaller saucepans can help to reduce the amount of food bought and cooked at any one time. This avoids a number of food safety difficulties including storage of foods for longer than necessary periods, and the leftovers which aren't consumed in a reasonable time. It also avoids unnecessary waste, and saves money.