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Picnic Food Safety

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The picnic season is upon us. There's so much to do and so much to plan. Tables, chairs, invitations, the list is endless. But without a doubt, the most important item for the big day is the food. The food is the one thing that will make or break your event.

When you hear the terms "Potentially Hazardous Food" or "danger zone" what do you think of? Inspectors in white coats? Food thermometers? If these things come to mind, you're on the right track. Let's get down to basics and make this very simple.

The danger zone is the temperature range between 45° - 140°F. It is within this temperature range where many bacteria like to grow. A Potentially Hazardous Food (PHF) is a product which consists of milk or milk products, eggs, meat, poultry, fish or shellfish. Any foods in the PHF list need to be kept out of the danger zone. Therefore, cold foods need to be kept cold, (i.e. 45°F or less) and hot foods need to be kept hot (i.e. 140°F or more).

I know what you're going to say, ***"I've been cooking for years and no one has ever gotten sick from my cooking"***. Sound familiar? All it takes is one incident of people becoming sick and your annual picnic will be no more.

Here are some simple tips to remember to have healthy food at your picnic: Keep food out of the danger zone, try and use serving utensils when handling food, wash your hands or use hand sanitizer when you have to handle food, keep extra serving utensils on hand in case some fall on the ground, keep food covered, keep food that needs to be kept cold in coolers with ice packs, and when possible, cook to order so that you are not trying to maintain a temperature of 140°F or more. Also, defrost frozen items in your refrigerator the day before your picnic and throw PHF items away if they have been in the danger zone for 4 hours or more. Last but not least, it wouldn't hurt to use a sanitized thermometer to take temperatures of your food – how else would you know if it's in the danger zone?

The point is that you want your guests to remember how much fun they had at your picnic and how good the food was, not how sick they were after it!