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'Chitlins' pose risk of food-borne illness

Choose pre-cooked to cut down on risks.

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Chitterlings may pose more risk of a food-borne illness than many people realize. Better known as "chitlins," these fried favorites can spread *Yersinia enterocolitica*, a bacterium commonly found in pigs and other animals.

"The problem occurs when raw chitterlings are cleaned in the kitchen," said Judy Harrison, an extension service food specialist with the University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Sciences.

Use care in the kitchen

Harrison said cross-contamination from raw chitterlings onto kitchen surfaces, food, toys, bottles and pacifiers is to blame for the spread of *Yersinia*.

While anyone who consumes the bacteria is susceptible, Harrison said most cases in Georgia occur in children less than 5 years old. These cases often occur in children under 2 who aren't even eating chitterlings.

"Young children are the ones getting sick from the bacteria being spread throughout the kitchen," she said. "If toys, bottles or pacifiers come in contact with contaminated areas in the kitchen, children get sick."

Anything that has touched the raw chitterlings or their juices is a potential source of contamination.

Common symptoms of *Yersinia* are diarrhea, stomach pains and fever. These symptoms usually occur within three to seven days of consumption.

Younger children may have severe, bloody diarrhea, while older children and adults may have severe stomach pain that resembles appendicitis. Severe cases may require hospitalization.

Buy precooked or boil them yourself

To prevent Yersinia, use only precooked chitterlings or boil them for 5 minutes before cleaning them, according to the Georgia Department of Human Resources' Public Health Division.

Clean the kitchen thoroughly. Use a solution of 1 tablespoon of chlorine bleach per gallon of warm water to treat surfaces that have come into contact with raw chitterlings or their juices. Then allow the surfaces to air-dry.

Wash utensils in this solution, too, once you've washed them in hot water and soap or in the dishwasher. Place them in the solution for 1 minute. Then allow them to air-dry.

After boiling the chitterlings, clean and cook them as usual. Make sure they're thoroughly cooked before eating them.