

Fix chitterlings safely

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Atlanta (GA) - If you, like many Georgians, enjoy chitterlings (also called chitlins) at holiday time, you know that cooked chitterlings are safe to eat - but you may not know that bacteria from raw chitterlings can cause severe diarrhea, especially in infants. Every year in Georgia, children get sick in homes where chitterlings are prepared, even if they didn't actually eat them.

"Although most people know that chitterlings must be carefully cleaned, few realize that the bacteria from raw chitterlings can cause illness by spreading to other foods and to baby bottles, pacifiers and toys. Infants and small children are at greatest risk of becoming infected," warns Kathleen E. Toomey, M.D., M.P.H., director of the Georgia Department of Human Resources (DHR) Division of Public Health. "You can prevent this very easily by boiling the chitterlings for five minutes before you clean them, and then washing everything that touched the chitterlings while they were raw."

Raw chitterlings may contain bacteria such as Salmonella or Yersinia. Unlike most bacteria, Yersinia survives cold temperatures and can grow inside the refrigerator. Even those chitterlings sold as "pre-cleaned" need more rinsing and cleaning at home before they are cooked. While raw chitterlings are being cleaned, bacteria can easily spread to refrigerators, sinks, counter tops, cooking utensils, other objects and other foods, either directly or from the hands of the person who is cleaning the chitterlings.

Infection with bacteria from raw chitterlings can cause a disease called enterocolitis, whose symptoms are fever, appendicitis-like stomach pain, and bloody diarrhea. Infants and children with enterocolitis can become severely dehydrated and may need to be hospitalized. The symptoms usually begin three to seven days after contact with the bacteria.

In November DHR's Division of Public Health launched an education program with the help of other state and community organizations to promote safe chitterling preparation. Posters with safety information are displayed at MARTA bus shelters in downtown Atlanta and radio spots are running throughout the state. Flyers with information about safe chitterling preparation are being distributed statewide by the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, College of Family

and Consumer Sciences; the Georgia Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program; and other community groups. The flyers and posters are also available at supermarkets throughout the state.

Here are five easy steps to prevent illness from bacteria in raw chitterlings:

Step 1: Boil raw chitterlings for five minutes before cleaning them. This does not affect the taste and will kill harmful bacteria, preventing them from spreading around the kitchen.

Step 2: Always wash hands after touching raw chitterlings and before touching anything or anyone else.

Step 3: While the chitterlings are boiling, wash everything in the kitchen that the raw chitterlings have touched. For cleaning the kitchen, use one tablespoon of bleach mixed in a gallon of water.

Step 4: Clean the chitterlings only after they have been boiled for five minutes. Boiling for five minutes will also make it easier to clean them.

Step 5: Cook cleaned chitterlings as always, and enjoy!

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