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Keep Summertime Cookouts Safe

Summer is the optimal time for families and friends to enjoy the outdoors and there is no better way to do so than to light up the grill. Since gas grills have become popular, 82% of Americans own a grill or a smoker, according to the Hearth, Patio and Barbeque Association (HPBA). In fact, 45% of grill owners use their grills typically one to two days a week during the peak summer months. Despite the popularity, it is important to recognize the health and safety hazards that come with grilling.

Before lighting the grill, be sure to keep sanitation and food safety in mind. Be sure to wipe down and disinfect all surfaces. Hand washing is the key to prevent any food borne illness; wash your hands for 30 seconds with soap and warm water before preparing and handling food and after handling raw meat, fish, poultry or eggs. It is also important to practice good hand washing techniques after using the restroom, after handling children and before you eat.

Wash all fruits and vegetables before preparing, and use separate utensils and plates for cooked and uncooked foods to avoid cross contamination of foods. Make sure that there are plenty of clean utensils and plates, and do not use the same platter and utensils for raw as well as cooked foods. Harmful bacteria from raw meat and poultry can contaminate well-cooked foods and cause illness.

Temperature is very important to food safety, so use a food thermometer to check temperatures. It is important to keep hot foods hot (at least 140 degrees F) and cold foods cold (below 45 degrees F). When defrosting meat, use a microwave oven and cook immediately, or allow the meat to defrost slowly in the refrigerator until it is ready to be cooked. Similarly, marinate foods in the refrigerator, not on the counter where warm temperatures will allow bacteria to thrive. Be sure to boil any marinades for at least three minutes if they contained raw meats and planned to be reused. When pre-cooking or partially cooking meats in the oven or microwave, be certain to put the partially cooked meat on the grill immediately, and cook all food thoroughly.

Safe *minimum* temperatures for meats, fish and poultry are as follows:

Whole poultry - 165 degrees F; poultry breasts – 165 degrees F; ground poultry – 165 degrees F; ground meats – 160 degrees F. Beef, pork, lamb and veal (steaks, roasts and chops) – 145 degrees F and allow to rest for at least 3 minutes.

When grilling food, it is important to follow safety measures to avoid any accidents. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), in 2006-2010, U.S. fire departments responded to an average of 8,600 home fires involving grills, hibachis or barbecues per year. These 8,600 fires caused an annual average of 10 civilian deaths, 140 civilian injuries and \$75 million in direct property damage. To reduce the risks associated with grilling, the following tips are recommended:

- Never burn charcoal inside homes, tents, campers or vehicles, and keep grills with freshly burned charcoal outside for at least 48 hours before disposing of ashes in a non-combustible container.
- Never use gasoline or kerosene to start a charcoal fire, as they may explode.
- Keep a spray bottle of water nearby to control flare-ups.
- Grill a safe distance from all structures, including houses, breezeways, garages and porches. Be mindful of overhead obstructions, such as awnings and tree branches.

- Check tubes and hoses on gas grills, and maintain them in good condition. Move hoses away from hot surfaces and dripping grease.
- Always store and transport propane tanks in the upright position.
- Keep children and pets away from the grill.

For more information about grilling foods safely, contact the Connecticut Department of Public Health Food Protection Program at (860)509-7297 and on their website at www.ct.gov/dph, or by contacting the National Fire Protection Association at www.nfpa.org.

Additional information about this or any other public health concern is available at the Central Connecticut Health District, serving the towns of Berlin, Newington, Rocky Hill and Wethersfield, by calling (860)721-2822 or online at www.ccthd.org.