Refrigeration advice in a bid to improve food safety standards

Foster Refrigerator, the world's leading manufacturer of commercial refrigerators and freezers, has published some rudimentary advice in a bid to enhance understanding of the key issues relating to food storage and safety.

"Through past experience and by talking to people within the industry, there is still a disappointing lack of understanding of the facts relating to basic food safety and storage," Chris Playford, Foster Refrigerator's Market and Development Director, told International Food Hygiene.

"There are a few key bits of advice and best practice procedures, which if adhered to, will massively reduce the instances of food related health and safety issues."

Common sense nuggets of information taken from Foster's 'top 10' list of do's and don'ts, include the following:

1) Immediate refrigeration

Put all meat and meat products, as well as dairy and other perishable items, into your refrigerator as soon as you take delivery. Do not postpone refrigeration. The 'danger zone' in which bacteria grows fastest is between 5°C and 63°C.

2) Check the temperature of incoming goods

It is not enough to focus on the temperature at which you store food on your premises. Always check the temperature of refrigerated and frozen foods as it arrives.

3) Hygiene

Bacteria that cause food poisoning can survive on the surfaces of your refrigerator. Clean your refrigerator regularly, internally and externally using a mild detergent. Aggressive cleaners can damage stainless steel.

4) Keep raw meats away from other foods

An absolutely critical point! Ideally raw and uncooked meats should be kept in separate refrigerators, but if this is impossible you must keep uncooked foods in a lower part of your fridge.

5) Store other products in the appropriate areas

If your refrigerator has to be multi-purpose, keep non-dripping dairy products like cheese at the top of the cabinet, with cooked meats and meat products like pies and paté below. Uncooked meats and sausages must be stored at the bottom of the fridge.

6) Take care over salads

In domestic situations salad is often stored at the bottom of the fridge: but this is not good food safety practice. You can store salads below cooked meats, but they should always be above raw meats. Always rinse salad ingredients thoroughly before use.

7) Rotate your stock diligently

Use labels or a dry-wipe board to record when foods are first placed in the refrigerator, and make a note of use-by dates on packaging.

Place newer stock at the back of your refrigerator, to ensure items do not remain unused past the appropriate date.

Ensure there is a space between all items to allow airflow. This is vital for correct temperature to be maintained.

8) When freezing, be sure to freeze immediately

Pre-packed meat should always be used by the recommended date or frozen immediately.

9) Thaw thoroughly and safely

Frozen meat must be thawed thoroughly before cooking or it will fail to cook properly. It is extremely dangerous however to leave meat to thaw at room temperature. Ideally use a specially designed thaw cabinet.

Alternatively you can thaw in a microwave or overnight in a refrigerator. Be especially careful that it does not drip onto other foods. Once frozen meat is thawed, never re-freeze unless it has been cooked first.

10) Once packaging is opened, move to covered containers

Once opened, always treat canned and packaged foods as fresh. Never store opened cans, Tetra Paks or other non-resealable packages in the refrigerator: instead transfer the contents to a sealed container first. Wrapped and shrink-wrapped foods, including sliced meats and cheeses, should also be re-covered, using cling film, foil or food-safe plastic containers as appropriate.

Foster takes industry relevant education and advice very seriously, and has for many years published free and impartial advice on refrigeration, freezing and health and safety issues, as well as a portfolio of papers relating to technical matters and environmental issues.

Papers can be viewed online at www.fosterrefrigerator.co.uk ∎

Public attitudes to food safety

The UK's Food Standards agency (FSA) has published 'Food and You 2012' the report on the results of its biannual survey exploring the public's attitudes and reported behaviour on food safety issues.

Following face-to-face interviews with more than 3,000 people, from a representative sample of adults aged 16+ from across the UK:

● Older respondents (aged 75+) were more than twice as likely to report food safety practices that were not in line with FSA guidance compared to younger respondents (aged 35-44).

● Male respondents were 1.5 times as likely to report food safety practices that were not in line with FSA guidance, compared to female respondents.

● The majority of respondents' food safety practices in the home were in line with FSA guidance. This was especially the case for cleaning and cooking practices and least likely to be the case for chilling practices compared to the 2010 survey.

A greater proportion of respondents in Wave 2 said that, in line with recommended practice, they never wash raw meat and poultry (32% compared to 26% in Wave 1) and that the fridge temperature should be between 0-5˚C (53% compared to 46% in Wave 1).

● Only two-thirds (64%) of respondents said that 'use by' dates were the best indicator of whether food was safe to eat.

Other commonly reported indicators were how food smells and how it looks.

● Almost three-quarters (72%) reported being concerned about food poisoning, and more than two-thirds (69%) of respondents said that cleanliness and hygiene was a consideration when deciding where to eat out.

● A third (34%) of respondents in England, Wales and Northern Ireland reported previously having seen a Food Hygiene Rating Scheme certificate and/or sticker. 44% of respondents in Scotland reported having seen a Food Hygiene Information Scheme sticker and/or certificate.

The findings will help the FSA to target their work with consumers where they can make the biggest impact on reducing foodborne disease. ∎