Colorado State University Cooperative Extension programs are helping Coloradans
• understand the risks of foodborne illness,
• learn prevention techniques to avoid food safety problems,
• reduce health costs associated with foodborne illness.

The Costs...

• An estimated 76 million persons contract foodborne illnesses each year in the United States, and complications arising from foodborne illness such as dehydration, pneumonia, kidney failure and miscarriage, result in more than 5,000 deaths annually.
• The annual economic and social consequences of foodborne disease in relation to health care costs and loss of work productivity is quite large—yearly cost of lost productivity is estimated at between $20 and $40 billion in the U.S. and $292 to $584 million in Colorado.
• Hospitalizations due to foodborne illnesses are estimated to cost over $3 billion each year in the United States and more than $43 million in Colorado.

Addressing Colorado Food Safety Issues

According to the Healthy People 2000 Initiative, foodborne illness in the United States is a major economic burden and cause of human suffering and death. While foodborne illnesses are often temporary, they can also result in more serious illnesses requiring hospitalization, or in long-term disability and death. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in four Americans become infected with some form of foodborne illness each year, and that annually foodborne contaminants cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths in the U.S. These estimates make the assumption that because most cases of foodborne illness are mild and/or short-lived and are difficult to trace back to a particular food, only 1% to 5% of actual cases are reported each year and even fewer are investigated.

The hazard of foodborne illness originating from mishandled food is an issue in any location where food is available to consumers. It is especially important when problem food is served to people with the highest risk—including pregnant women, young children, the elderly, and people with chronic disease and HIV. Food poisoning is usually a preventable disease and in most instances can be avoided simply by applying well-established hygienic standards in the production, preparation, holding and serving of food. Effective food safety education must increase knowledge as well as raise consumer awareness about food safety risks—then motivate consumers to change their food-related behaviors—primarily hand washing, adequate cooking of food, avoiding cross-contamination, and washing fresh fruits and vegetables to reduce microbial risks.
The Payoff...

- Colorado State University Cooperative Extension offers food safety education through ServSafe™, a certification program developed by the National Restaurant Association. Eight training teams who serve twenty Colorado counties have trained 1,157 restaurant managers/owners and food handlers from nursing homes, grocery stores, jails and prisons, catering businesses, service clubs and senior meal sites. Documented changes in food safety behavior showed 84% to 95% planned to adopt at least one or more recommended food handling practices, and knowledge increased 30%.

- Following a suspected link between two cases of E. coli 01557:H7 infection in children who consumed watermelon with unwashed rinds at a local Farmers’ Market, the Larimer County Department of Health & Environment immediately required vendors to stop providing free food samples. Cooperative Extension in collaboration with county health officials provided training for more than 200 farmers, market managers, vendors and health department officials; 90% increased their knowledge of good agricultural practices and safe produce sampling guidelines; 83% said they planned to make changes in food-handling procedures, including installation of hand-washing stations, sanitizing knives and cutting boards, and pre-washing produce prior to market. A six-month follow-up with growers and vendors indicated that most made the recommended changes or chose not to offer samples at farmers’ markets.

- A survey of restaurant managers in Colorado, Wyoming and Montana found a strong preference for hiring workers with training in safe food-handling procedures; the majority of managers also indicated a willingness to pay for training, and reward trained employees with higher starting salaries, increased wages and promotions.