The Independence Day holiday was just last week. I hope you had a great holiday and don’t have any lingering “touch of the flu” this week. Holidays as well as many summer meals are ground zero for food safety challenges.

If last week’s holiday dinner included undercooked hamburgers and potato salad left in the hot sun for hours, it might be more than just a holiday hangover that is upsetting your stomach and giving you a headache. You might have a case of foodborne illness.

Let’s take a look at 10 tips for a food safe outdoor meal or picnic.

1. **WASH YOUR HANDS.** You have a lot going on at the party and you probably don’t have a sink outside, but if you are handling burgers, hot dogs, chicken or other meat, you must wash your hands. Make a trip inside to the water or bring some water and soap outside.

2. Finish cooking the burgers and then bring out the lettuce, onions, Brussels sprouts, beets, anchovies and other burger toppings. **KEEP RAW FOOD SEPARATE FROM COOKED FOOD.**

3. You want to look like a prepared host, so you should set out all of your food on the picnic table, sitting in the 90-degree heat an hour before everyone gets there, right? Don’t do that! **KEEP HOT FOOD HOT AND COLD FOOD COLD.** Keep your potato salad and cut melons in a bowl that’s stored in a cooler packed with ice. To serve, use a small bowl with your potato salad and nest it in a larger bowl filled with ice. That food will stay at 40 degrees for a long time.

4. **USE A THERMOMETER.** While it may seem impressive to cook your meat based on the juice color changing from red to gray, you can’t rely on color alone to ensure meat is cooked properly. Research has shown us that the age of the animal makes more difference in the color of the meat than the temperature. Animals that are older tend to have a browner color to the meat, regardless of temperature. Use a thermometer and bring those burgers to at least 160 degrees and steaks to 145 degrees.

5. When you are serving any food, **USE A UTENSIL.** This should be a dedicated serving spoon or fork, NOT your own spoon and no hands! Don’t borrow the
spoon from the potato salad to serve the slaw. You’ve just contaminated both dishes.

6. **WASH YOUR CLEANING SURFACES.** Avoid cross contamination by washing your cutting board between each use. If you don’t feel like doing dishes in the middle of your party, designate separate cutting boards for each type of food (beef, vegetables, pork, etc.). Or, cover the board with foil or freezer paper, cut on it, then discard.

7. It’s hot and you’re standing in front of an open flame for hours. **DRINK SOME WATER.** You’re no good to the party if you’ve passed out from dehydration.

8. **COVER YOUR TRASH.** An open trash can full of leftover food is the equivalent of shouting an open invitation to all of the pests and bugs in your neighborhood.

9. There is a lot of food at your party and it has likely been picked through by a lot of people. If any food has been sitting out for more than one hour, **THROW AWAY THE LEFTOVERS.**

10. Despite reading all of these tips, does your husband still insist on cooking without using the thermometer? Come behind him and check all those burgers before they go on the serving table. Better safe than sorry.

Next time you have an outdoor meal, you’ll be prepared to make sure your friends and family don’t go home with uninvited guests — such as e-coli, salmonella or botulism.

**Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.**