When you are shaking off winter with your spring cleaning, don’t forget to get rid of all those microbes lurking in the kitchen. It’s a great time to target harmful bacteria that lurks on kitchen cabinets and even in the refrigerator.

While you can’t see foodborne bacteria, they particularly like moist environments, such as kitchens, drains and refrigerators. A clean, dry kitchen helps fight bacteria and keeps you and your family safe from foodborne illness.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that approximately 48 million new cases of food-related illnesses — resulting in 3,000 deaths and 128,000 hospitalizations — occur in the United States annually. Each costs $1,646 per illness for a total health related cost of $51 billion. So, if the fear of the illness won’t scare you into cleaning up that kitchen, the hit to your wallet should.

I’m not suggesting that you use magic cleaners or other expensive remedies — just water, soap, bleach and some old-fashioned elbow grease. Let’s take a tour of the kitchen and its various dirty places.

Your counters may look clean, but bacteria may be hiding all over your kitchen. Always clean surfaces thoroughly with hot water and soap. After thoroughly washing surfaces with hot water and soap, you can sanitize them with a diluted chlorine bleach solution or a disinfectant kitchen cleaner. Use a mixture of 3/4-teaspoon liquid chlorine bleach per quart of water (or 1 tablespoon bleach per gallon of water). Let the solution stand on the surface for several minutes, then rinse with cold water and air dry or pat dry with fresh paper towels. If you are mixing it and using a spray bottle, be sure to discard the solution and remake it at least once a week. It becomes less effective as the chlorine evaporates from the solution.

Kitchen sponges and rags are a great place for bacteria to thrive. They are moist and have lots of hidden food buried in them to eat. Consider using a paper towel for surfaces and throw it away after use. If you use cloth towels, be sure to wash them in hot water in the
washing machine. If you use sponges, put them through the dishwasher, microwave them for 2 minutes or simply discard them often.

The fridge is a perfect place for bacteria to grow. Not only does it hold good things for you to eat, bacteria also have quite a feast there. Get rid of spills, bacteria, mold and mildew. Clean your refrigerator weekly to get rid of germs that might tag onto food. Wash with hot water and soap. Rinse with a damp cloth. Manufacturers don’t recommend using bleach, solvent cleaning solutions or abrasive cleaners since they can damage seals, gaskets and inside fixtures.

Now, let’s hit that sink. Food particles get caught in the drain and disposal, allowing for the perfect place for bacteria to grow. Clean the kitchen sink, disposal and drain once or twice a week with warm water and soap. Disinfect the drain by pouring in a solution of 3/4-teaspoon bleach per quart of water. Or, boil water and pour it down the drain. The hot water will kill germs, dislodge any greasy remains in the drain and improve the septic system activity.

Do you open your microwave and wonder when it got so dirty? Microwaves are easy to miss in the cleaning cycle and a perfect place for bacteria. There are tricks to make it easier to clean. I heat a bowl of water in the microwave for 4 to 5 minutes. Let the steam from the water soften all those crusty parts that are hard to clean. After a few minutes, remove the bowl and use hot water and soap to wipe down the interior.

If you have more questions on cleaning or food safety, give me a call at the office at 474-2426.

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.

-30-