

A Closer Look At Your Health: Food handling on a river trip

We're hearing reports of river rafters coming down with gastrointestinal illnesses in some parts of the state, which means it's probably a good time to review hygiene tips for rafters and other boaters. It would be terrible to be sick on a rafting trip, and there are things you can do to lessen your risk.

Ugh. I can't imagine anything worse than being sick on a rafting trip. What are the main culprits?

There are lots of ways to get sick on a rafting trip, but today we're going to focus on food handling. Proper food handling and hand washing can prevent the spread of communicable diseases like salmonella, norovirus, E. coli and other gastrointestinal illnesses that can make shooting rapids especially nerve-wracking.

So we're back to hand-washing.

I can't stress the hand-washing enough for everyone, but especially for food preparers. Disease-causing organisms can be transferred from the hands of anyone preparing food, unless that person has washed his hands before touching anything edible. Anyone preparing food should wash their hands frequently with soap and water that has been treated with a capful of bleach for each gallon.

It's difficult to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold on a rafting trip. What do you suggest?

The same rules apply on land or water, but you're right, it is difficult to maintain temperatures in the outdoors. Even so, raw eggs and meats and other potentially hazardous food should be stored in a cooler that is 41 degrees F or colder. Put a thermometer in the cooler and check it frequently. Block ice lasts longer than cubes and will help keep the temperature where you want it. Raw meat should be stored in separate coolers from the rest of the food, or at least in leak-proof containers at the bottom of the cooler so it won't contaminate other foods. Most food, except for raw fruits and veggies that should be washed anyway before consumption, should not be stored in contact with ice or water in coolers.

So the rules are probably the same for preparing food away from a kitchen as well.

They are. Use separate cutting boards for raw meats, poultry or fish and other foods, or clean and sanitize them in between. Cook meat and eggs thoroughly. Thaw frozen foods in coolers. Don't keep food that might spoil or become contaminated at temperatures higher than 41 degrees F for longer than 4 hours. Use utensils to serve foods, including shared, bagged snacks, which should be poured into a bowl before they are served. Don't grab stuff off a platter with your fingers no matter how hungry you are!

What about after the meal; how do you wash dishes and utensils in the outdoors?

The three-container system will help ensure your dishes are clean and sanitized after a meal. Fill the first container with water that is 110 degrees F and dish soap. Fill the second with clean hot water, again at 110 degrees. Fill the third with clean warm water that is 75 degrees and a capful of bleach per gallon of water. Scrape all the food off the dishes, then wash them in the first container, rinse them in the second, and immerse them for 30 seconds in the third container to sanitize them. Then air-dry the dishes on a clean drain board or in a drying net.

Anything else?

Public health officials are interested in hearing from rafters on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River who have concerns about gastroenteritis related to a trip in July or August. If

that's you, please call the Idaho Careline at 2-1-1 and you will be transferred to the Eastern Idaho Public Health District, or you can call the health district directly at 208-533-3152, and then dial 2.

A Closer Look At Your Health airs at 6:50 a.m. most Tuesdays on KBOI News Radio 670AM.