

Americans Need Help Managing "Mealtime Multitasking" American Dietetic Association Shares Pointers for September National Food Safety Month.

Chicago, September 7, 2004 – "Multitasking" is a term that may have started in the office, but now it's made its way to the kitchen – where more and more Americans say their busy lives require them to multitask while eating and preparing food. But while juggling multiple tasks at once may be helpful in climbing the corporate ladder, when it comes to mealtime, survey results show most of us take shortcuts that can lead to foodborne illness.

According to a new survey conducted by the American Dietetic Association, nine out of 10 Americans say they multitask while preparing meals, and 62 percent say they are too busy to even sit down and eat most or some of the time. What keeps us preoccupied? Nearly two-thirds say they multitask while eating and preparing meals in order to maximize personal time, while others cite increased family and work demands as the activities that divide their time.

Most of us are so over-extended that we just squeeze in a meal without really paying attention to whether or not we're preparing foods safely. Since eliminating the need to multitask can be virtually impossible, families should incorporate proper home food safety habits into their daily routines in order to diminish the risk of foodborne illness.

In honor of September National Food Safety Month, the American Dietetic Association offers these pointers for mealtime multitaskers.

Organize Your To-Do List

According to the ADA survey, the top three activities home cooks juggle while cooking include watching television (73 percent), washing dishes (70 percent) and talking on the phone (62 percent). Other activities that coincide with meal preparation range from working on the computer (38 percent) to cleaning the refrigerator or kitchen (36 percent) and from playing with children (23 percent) to petting the dog or cat (20 percent).

But while mealtime multitaskers may have their hands full, those hands may not always be clean: Survey results show nearly one in three home cooks (31 percent) do not consistently wash their hands when multitasking while preparing food. Our hands are the most common transmitter for the majority of bacteria – so it's very important that everyone in the family makes it a habit to wash their hands before, during and after handling foods.

Develop a system to keep track of food preparation to help over-extended families manage their home food safety "to-dos." For instance, for the nine out of 10 Americans who typically prepare meat dishes for dinner, use color-coded cutting boards and utensils to prevent cross-contamination – a leading cause of foodborne illness.

Designate one color for raw meats and another color for ready-to-eat foods – and be consistent. Also, keep a meat thermometer in a drawer next to the oven so you have ready access to make sure meats are cooked to a proper internal temperature.

Manage Your Time

For other mealtime multitaskers, “eating” is just one more item on their daily office agenda. According to the ADA survey, more than two-thirds of Americans say they typically eat lunch (35 percent) or snack throughout the day (30 percent) at their desks. And 15 percent admit they even dine “al desko” for breakfast. But while these desktop diners may stay on top of their workload, survey results show most need help managing their brown bags.

Nine out of 10 Americans who bring a packed lunch to work report that as many as four hours pass from the time they get to work until they eat lunch – twice as long as perishable foods should sit out of refrigeration. And in hot weather (90 degrees Fahrenheit and above) that window is reduced from two hours to just one.

It’s easy to lose track of time when you’re at work and forget the two-hour rule for perishable food items – so make it easy on yourself. Before you even sit down at your desk or right after you “clock-in,” toss your lunch in your workplace refrigerator. This also will give you a reason to stand up and stretch when you go retrieve it at lunchtime. Or, pack your lunch in an insulated lunch bag – and throw in a frozen ice pack to keep foods cold. Another tip: Bring in a refrigerator thermometer to make sure your workplace fridge is set below 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

Pay Attention to Details

While some multitaskers mix mealtimes with work or domestic responsibilities, more than a quarter of Americans (30 percent) juggle mealtimes with driving. Among the most common day-to-day activities that demand they dine while on-the-go: running errands (72 percent), grocery shopping (42 percent) and commuting (39 percent). Yet when mealtime multitaskers hit the road, they often forget the number one rule for home food safety – handwashing. And with most car-friendly foods of the handheld variety (fast food, candy, chips/crackers and granola/energy bars are popular choices), this means many dashboard diners could be flirting with disaster.

According to the ADA survey, more than three out of four Americans (77 percent) do not consistently wash their hands after pumping gas. Nor does the majority of drivers (64 percent) keep moist towelettes or hand sanitizer in the car to wash before digging in. Next time you dine “ala car,” avoid spreading bacteria from the gas pump to your portable feast by stocking your glove box with miniature bottles of hand sanitizer, moist towelettes or even a tub of antibacterial wipes so you can clean up, even on the go.

Online Quiz : Earn Your Home Food Safety “MBA”

How proficient are you when it comes to mealtime multitasking? Put your skills to the test! Visit www.homefoodsafety.org and take the online quiz to find out if you have what it takes to earn your Home Food Safety “MBA” (“Mastery of the Mealtime Balancing Act”)!

With approximately 65,000 members, the American Dietetic Association is the nation’s largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. ADA serves the public by promoting optimal nutrition, health and well-being. To locate a registered dietitian in your area, visit the American Dietetic Association at www.eatright.org.

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