



Food safety errors abound in TV cooking shows, study says

June 22, 2004

University of Guelph News Release

Prof. Doug Powell and Lisa Mathiasen

Watching TV may truly be hazardous to your health. New research from the University of Guelph reveals that chefs on popular television cooking programs make food safety errors 13 times as often as they handle food correctly.

The study, published in *Food Protection Trends*, says an average of seven food-handling mistakes are made during a typical 30-minute show. The most frequent errors include poor hand washing; contamination between raw and ready-to-eat food; failure to wash fresh fruits and vegetables; and inadequate washing of cooking utensils and cutting boards.

"These same mistakes are commonly made by consumers as well," said Prof. Doug Powell, director of Guelph's Food Safety Network, which conducted the study. "There is a possibility that some consumers are developing their poor food-handling behaviors based on the instruction from television cooking programs. It's sort of like having your parents teach you how to drive; they teach you the same mistakes they make."

Researchers analyzed television food and cooking programs that aired in June 2002 and 2003, mostly on the Food Network Canada. They studied 60, 30-minute segments from 2002 and 56 from 2003. About 30 per cent of the shows were produced in Canada. The remainder came from the United States and the United Kingdom.

The researchers used a defined list of food safety practices, but accounted for the fact that many of the steps for meal preparation are completed before a cooking program is recorded. During the 60-odd hours of programming, 916 poor food-handling incidents were observed. "For every positive food-handling behavior, there were about 13 negative behaviors," Powell said.

The most frequent error was poor hand washing, which occurred in 75 per cent of the segments from 2002 and 96 per cent of those from 2003. "Even though many of the sinks on TV cooking shows don't function, it's still important that cooking hosts acknowledge the necessity of hand washing, especially before beginning meal preparation and after handling raw meat and poultry," said Lisa Mathiasen, a Food Safety Network researcher.

Another prevalent mistake was not separating raw and fresh foods, which was observed in 72 per cent of the shows in 2002 and 86 per cent of those in 2003. "This could potentially lead to the transfer of pathogenic organisms," she said.

Other examples of poor food handling included wiping off a cutting board with a raw meat wrapper, using a knife as a fly swatter, using food that had fallen on the floor, and adding ingredients with an unwashed spoon that had been used to taste food.

Mathiasen points out that television cooking shows are a particularly good site for assessing food safety practices because of their popularity, uniqueness and availability. Numerous studies have also shown that North Americans rely on television cooking shows as one of their primary sources for information on food preparation and food safety.

"Taking the time to correctly point out risky behaviors can lead to a program that is both entertaining and informative by opening up a dialogue about food safety," she said. "But the food safety aspect needs to be correct or it can introduce or reinforce improper food handling, which may lead to illness."