

Television chefs could do more to teach viewers about safe food handling

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Researchers from Kansas State University (USA) and Tennessee State University (USA) have found that the majority of television cooking shows featuring celebrity chefs around the world demonstrate unsafe food handling practices that can lead to cross-contamination and food poisoning. Television cooking shows with professional chefs are followed by a large audience and are perceived as entertainment sources but could potentially also be used as a powerful mass-media educational tool for teaching large numbers of viewers about safe food handling at home.

Most of the 100 cooking show episodes reviewed in the study focused on one dish at a time but some chefs prepared several dishes simultaneously – increasing the chance of cross-contamination. Handwashing is a basic principle of food hygiene, but none of the chefs were shown washing their hands before cooking. One chef verbally mentioned handwashing before beginning food preparation and half of the observed chefs mentioned handwashing after handling meat. 21 chefs out of 24 handled uncooked meat without washing their hands. Other mistakes by chefs included adding food (79%) and sampling food (38%) with their hands during or after cooking - including when food would not be cooked further. Only one third of the chefs demonstrated safe chopping board or surfaces use – others failed to wash chopping board surfaces after cutting uncooked meat or prepared uncooked meat and ready-to-eat foods on the same chopping board. Most of the chefs (96%) used the colour of the meat to visually determine if it was cooked while only six chefs (25%) used a thermometer as recommended by food safety agencies. In addition, 88% of chefs gave recommended cooking times and 58% commented on which texture would indicate the meat was cooked.

Any of these improper behaviours demonstrated on television could lead to cross-contamination and food poisoning. The study recommend that TV cooking shows include basic communication and demonstration of safe food handling practices in order to promote good food safety habits at home.

The study reviewed 100 episodes of cooking TV shows hosted by 24 different chefs among 30 unique series of cooking TV shows (e.g. Jamie at Home, Nigellissima, Gordon Ramsay's Home Cooking) available through a variety of online sources such as Netflix or Amazon. All episodes included the preparation of at least one meat dish (e.g. beef, seafood, chicken, pork). A questionnaire based on a list of food safety behaviours, both positive and negative, was developed to support the observations while reviewing the programmes.

Previous research similarly revealed that European TV cooking shows frequently demonstrate unsafe handling of food or lack of measures to prevent food poisoning. A study from 2014 proposed that cooking shows should stick to recognized food safety standards (e.g. the five keys to safer food developed by the World Health Organization) using the opportunity to introduce simple but important food safety messages to mass audiences. [2]



Food safety is a significant public health issue. Every year, more than 23 million fall ill from food poisoning in Europe, resulting in about 5000 deaths.[3] Mishandling of food or poor safety practices at home are common causes of food poisoning.

References

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