



Tell It Like It Is

What's the best way to get food handling information out to consumers?

If you thaw a frozen food product thoroughly, can you refreeze it? Once you open a package of fresh food, how much longer can you store it? Or can you freeze it once you've opened it? Can you freeze canned foods? These are just a sampling of the kinds of consumer questions the Food Safety Network at Ontario's University of Guelph receives everyday. It's an indication that this kind of information is not always available from food manufacturers, and that without answers consumers could be making uninformed decisions about food handling safety.

Sarah Wilson is the Network's Information Centre co-ordinator. She says these types of consumer queries are the most common ones the Network receives through its toll-free line and e-mail service. "If you've got a perishable food product, everything changes after you've opened it," says Wilson. "That kind of information [on how to store it] is not on the label, but I would say that it's the most common thing we talk about with consumers. The other is if the products can be frozen for longer storage after they've been opened." This is of special interest for consumers who purchase larger quantities for economic reasons, she says, noting that if there are just one or two people in the home, they'd rather know how to store food safely than have to consume the product three nights in a row.

Rather than leave consumers guessing, information on safe food handling should be readily available. And food manufacturers are an ideal source. For one thing they know their food products best and understand why, for instance, they give certain products the best before dates that they do, as well as what conditions will keep those products safe to consume after they've been opened or thawed.

How food manufacturers can supply additional food-handling information becomes the next question. One possibility is to provide it right on the food packaging.

Even if manufacturers make room for more information on the packaging, they will still have to ensure it is effective, meaningful and science-based, and that consumers know where to look for it.

But that has its challenges. For one thing, says Wilson, it's costly to change the labelling. There's also quite a bit of information on food packaging already, including French and English text, the new nutrition facts tables and the manufacturers' marketing material. It would be great if it could all fit, says Wilson, but even then there's the issue of the huge number of consumers who don't read labels or who don't read them carefully. In the U.S. there have been cases of consumers who were confused by the

images on packaging of products that are pre-browned or have grill marks on them. While this doesn't always mean food is cooked or fully cooked, some consumers have mistakenly believed they were and had consumed the product without cooking it. There's also the issue of refrigeration. As Wilson explains, some food products require refrigeration to be safe for consumption, while for other products refrigeration is simply an issue of quality. The difference, however, isn't always clear from the wording on the packaging.

Even if manufacturers make room for more information on the packaging, they will still have to ensure it is effective, meaningful and science-based, and that consumers know where to look for it. Reinforcing it with other information sources may be the best approach, says Wilson, adding that consumers generally look to several sources for information anyway. Ideally the industry could provide information on point-of-purchase displays, or through 1-800 numbers and websites. "The more we can talk about food safety and raise awareness about safe food handling techniques, then why not?" says Wilson. "There's always that possibility for information overload, and that's a communications challenge. But because consumers are asking these kinds of questions there's an indication that they'd like to know the answers."

SAFETY FIRST

In a recent e-newsletter *Food in Canada* asked readers if food manufacturers should add safe food-handling information to product labels. Eighty-two per cent agreed that they should, while 18 per cent was against the idea.