

HIDDEN HAZARDS

A backyard barbecue is one of the simple joys of summer—if you don't let controversial reports of dangers ruin your fun. We asked the experts to assess the true risks. Here, the bottom line on staying healthy. By Kathleen McAuliffe



MAYONNAISE Mayonnaise actually discourages the growth of pathogens, thanks to its acidity, reports Linda Harris, Ph.D., a microbiologist at the University of California at Davis. So why the reputation for causing food poisoning? Mayonnaise traditionally was made from raw farmyard eggs, which were sometimes contaminated with salmonella. "As a result," says Harris, "people came to associate mayonnaise with food poisoning." Today, however, store-bought mayonnaise is almost always made from pasteurized eggs.

"It's all the other things in the salad—tuna, chicken, potato and other common ingredients—that provide a great growth medium for microbes," warns Harris. When the temperature tops ninety degrees, such dishes should not be out of the refrigerator for more than one hour (two hours outside the fridge is safe at cooler temperatures).

PREPACKAGED SALADS Prepackaged salads are convenient and healthy. But heavily publicized reports of *E. coli* poisoning and other illnesses traced to produce have sparked concern. The mechanical washing methods are just as good as those we use at home, says Sheldon Margen, M.D., professor emeritus at the University of California School of Public Health, in Berkeley. And no outbreaks have been linked to salad greens sold in the U.S. in sealed bags marked "washed," "triple-washed," "pre-washed" or "ready to eat." Experts say you don't even need to wash them at home. But you should wash produce marked "organic," "natural" or "fresh." That refers to how they are grown and doesn't mean they are clean.

MARGARINE You gave up butter. Then you heard margarine wasn't so good, either. What should you eat? It's true that stick margarine may actually be worse for your heart than butter. The saturated fats found in butter boost artery-clogging low-density lipoproteins (LDL), but leave beneficial high-density

lipoproteins (HDL) unaffected. Hard margarine, on the other hand, is chock full of trans fat, which simultaneously boosts LDL and decreases HDL—which, incidentally, are particularly protective against heart disease in women. The very process that makes margarine hard, hydrogenation, creates trans fats.

The best choice of all, says Alberto Ascherio, M.D., associate professor of nutrition and epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health, in Boston, is a tub or liquid margarine that boasts "no trans fats" on the label. But remember that margarine is still a fat—consume too much and you will be, too.

summer safety guide

GRILLING Grilling can be healthy—if you don't overcook your food. At high temperatures, compounds (such as amino acids) in grilled meat, poultry and fish are converted into heterocyclic amines, or HCAs. (Vegetables are not a concern.) In animal research, HCAs have been linked to breast cancer. In fact, one study found a four- to five-fold greater risk of breast cancer in women who prefer well-done meat compared to those who prefer it rare or medium. One solution: marinate meats. "In chicken, it cuts down on HCAs by ninety percent," reports Mark G. Knize, a biomedical scientist at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, in Livermore, California. Precooking it for two minutes in the microwave before grilling also works. But don't undercook, he warns. That's a recipe for food poisoning.

PLASTIC WRAP Recent headlines stated that a dangerous chemical in plastic wrap—the plasticizer di-(2-ethylhexyl) adipate, or DEHA—might be leaching into food. DEHA, which makes plastic wrap cling, is found in most plastic film used by supermarkets and at least one brand (Reynolds) sold for home use. Some reports claimed that DEHA disturbed hormone function, but no human studies support the theory. "Extensive toxicological data give us no reason to suspect it would have any effect on hormone activity," reports George Pauli, Ph.D., director of the Food and Drug Administration division of product policy.



COFFEE Erratic heart beats, lumpy breasts and birth defects are just some of the ills that have been blamed on caffeinated coffee. But all those accusations, based on preliminary investigations, have not held up. "Coffee drinkers have not been found to be at increased risk for cancer, heart disease or other ills," reports Manfred Kroger, Ph.D., professor of food science at Pennsylvania State University, in University Park. If anything, the brew hasn't gotten enough recognition for its virtues, says Walter Willett, M.D., a professor of nutrition and epidemiology at Harvard. Research suggests that coffee has antidepressant effects that may dramatically reduce the risk of suicide. During pregnancy, however, experts still advise caution (no more than two cups a day).

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS The label on saccharin (Sweet'n Low, Sugar Twin and Sucaryl) warns that the sweetener causes cancer in laboratory animals. So why is it still available? "It only causes cancer in rats in massive doses," explains Robert Marshall, Ph.D., professor of food science and human nutrition at the University of Missouri, in Columbia. The label on aspartame (Equal and NutraSweet) warns only that it contains phenylalanine, a substance hazardous to individuals who lack the enzyme necessary to process the chemical. But people have complained of reactions that range from headaches to allergic responses. Yet, study subjects given aspartame suffered fewer ills than the placebo group. Two other synthetic sweeteners have recently been approved for use in the U.S.: acesulfame-K (Sunette) and sucralose (Splenda). Both seem to be safe, so far.

ALCOHOL Studies the world over show that women who have one drink a day live longer than those who are either teetotalers or heavy drinkers. The reason: Ethanol in modest doses improves the ratio of good-to-bad cholesterol in the blood. According to Eric Rimm, Ph.D., associate professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, a daily glass of alcohol—wine, spirits or beer—reduces the risk of heart disease by 20 to 40 percent for women. However, women who consume one alcoholic beverage a day are 10 percent more likely to get breast cancer, a risk that rises with each additional daily drink. Still, cardiovascular disease kills at least ten times more women than breast cancer does.

Kathleen McAuliffe is a frequent contributor to Ladies' Home Journal.

CHIP SIMONS

contributors

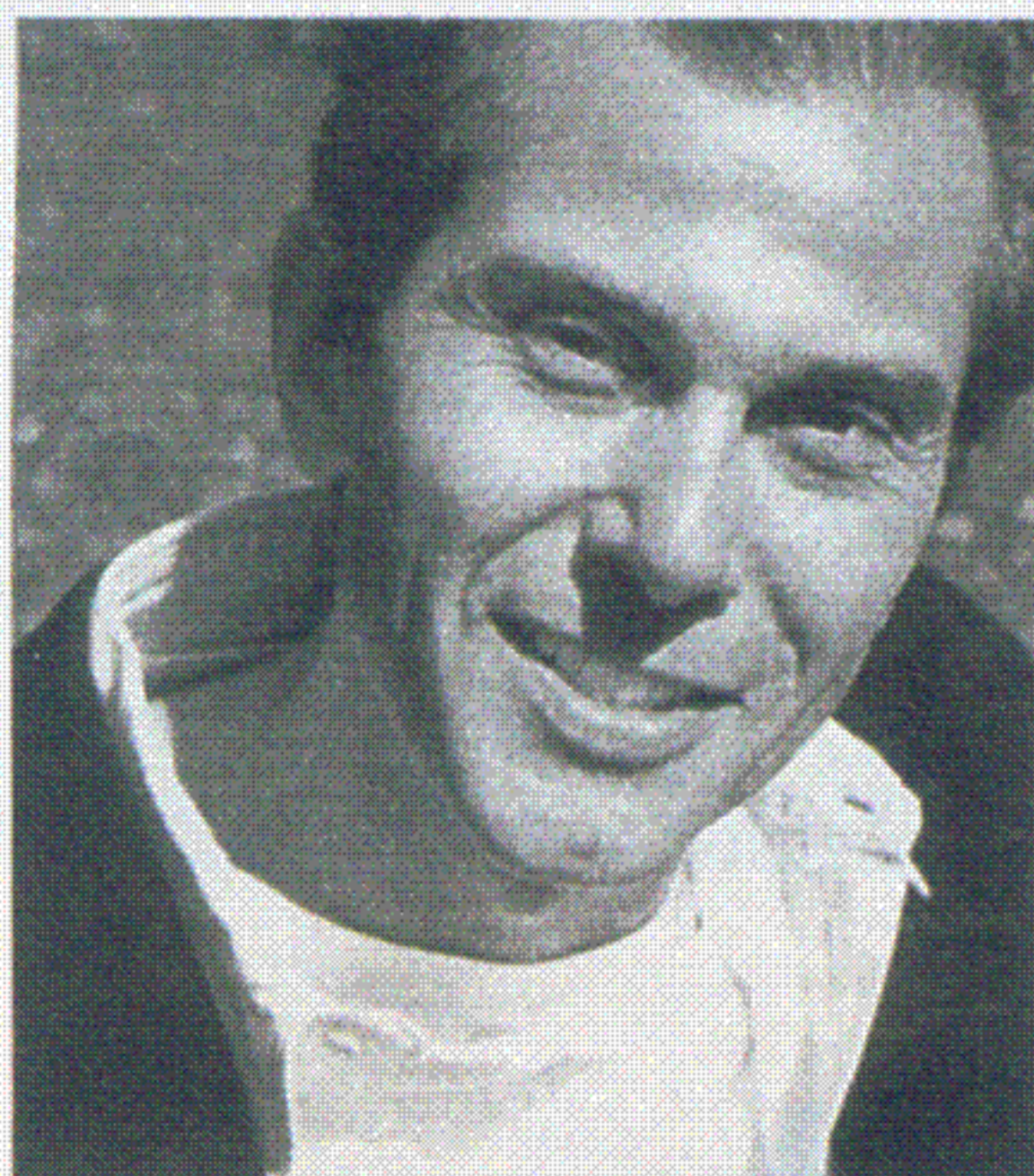


GEORGEANNE BRENNAN

Occupation: food and garden writer.
Assignment: to tell readers how to create florist-quality bouquets (see "Making Arrangements," page 110).
Qualifications: her book, *Backyard Bouquets* (Chronicle Books, 1998), and a garden of one thousand roses.
Plans: to finish another book and plant some sweet peas.

JUDITH NEWMAN

Of Meg Ryan, the big winner of LHJ's Women's Choice Awards (see page 96), writer Newman says, "Meg is a Betty in a sea of Veronicas. Men want to date her; women want to be her best friend."



HERIBERT BREHM

OCCUPATION: photographer.
ASSIGNMENT: to capture the wonder of water for the health and beauty story "Waterworks," page 104.
HOW HE DID IT: by spending ten hours with one model and three kinds of water (tap, bottled and pool).
FINAL ASSESSMENT: "Water is beautiful—unless it gets into my camera."

CATHERINE FREDMAN

She's a partner of choice for Trivial Pursuit, which means her new assignment, reporting and writing the "Know How" column, is the perfect match for Fredman. Whether it's how to treat a bee sting, memorize phone numbers or build a sand castle (see page 55), the New York writer will tell us how to do all sorts of handy things we never quite got around to figuring out.



KATHLEEN McAULIFFE

As a devoted barbecuer, McAuliffe found the food and cooking safety tips she learned reporting "Hidden Hazards" (page 86) invaluable. "The grill is really my second kitchen," says the Florida writer. The most surprising thing she learned? That experts now recommend not serving steak well done. "I've never liked it that way, anyway," she says.



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