

# Making food, safer: Extension's new food safety specialist

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As WSU Extension's new consumer food safety specialist, Stephanie Smith helps Washington residents eat and prepare foods safely.

Hired last fall, Smith educates people and helps officials and Extension faculty in Washington's 39 counties and one tribal office, with the aim of keeping people safe and healthy.

Q: Do people come to you with food safety concerns? Or do you come to them?

People approach me with food safety questions that range from determining if canned or frozen foods are still safe, to topics trending on the web, such as cooking salmon in a dishwasher.

I'm currently assessing the needs of government agencies, Extension offices, and consumers across the state, so I will be coming to people and asking about their concerns. This allows me to develop a program that's helpful for everyone.

Q: How did you get into food safety? What interests you about this work?



Stephanie Smith is the new Extension Consumer Food Safety Specialist.

“I earned my bachelor’s and master’s degrees in microbiology and a doctorate in environmental science, with an emphasis on environmental microbiology and toxicology. I did my postdoctoral work at the WSU/University of Idaho School of Food Science.

I very much wanted a career that would allow me to have an immediate impact on people, interacting with people on a daily basis.

When people think of food safety, most think of food recalls and canning. While those are extremely important, food safety is much bigger than that. For example, the Washington State Department of Health has put out advisories on fish consumption. Some species of fish from waters across Washington are contaminated with mercury, lead and toxic chemicals. Many people, including pregnant or nursing women, children and the elderly, should not be consuming these fish, and people need to be aware of that. My background in environmental microbiology and toxicology can help expand awareness of food safety, whether we are talking about canning, proper cooking temperatures of food, or toxins.

Q: How do you affect sustainability?

Food waste costs Americans approximately \$165 billion annually, and households throw out as much as \$2,200 in food annually. That’s a lot of money, especially for the 14 percent of U.S. households facing food insecurity. It can be very difficult to reduce waste while ensuring food safety. Some stories have circulated on how you can supposedly reduce waste by using expired foods. This is absolutely not recommended, as it is a major food safety concern.

The best thing you can do is only buy food that you know you’ll be able to consume before it expires. Another option is to compost food waste, especially things like produce, egg shells and coffee grounds, so nutrients can be put back into the soil.

Q: How do you interface with producers, entrepreneurs or foragers?

I share information and spread awareness. For example, I am working with faculty in the School of Food Science to deliver training for the Food Safety Modernization Act, now being rolled out by the Food and Drug Administration, to help entrepreneurs and small producers comply with new rules.

To use another example, many people like to forage for mushrooms, especially the highly coveted morels. The problem with mushrooms is that

there are many lookalikes out there. A deadly mushroom can look almost exactly like an edible variety, and people from outside our region may not be aware of that—often, only an experienced mycologist can tell them apart. It really comes down to getting the information out there.

Q: What food safety habits should consumers practice?

There are four main rules in food safety: Clean—wash your hands first and clean surfaces well; Chill—keep refrigerator temperatures below 40 degrees Fahrenheit and the freezer below zero; Separate—keep raw meats and eggs away from that fresh produce and do not use the same cutting board for preparing meats and produce; Cook—cook roasts and steaks to a minimum of 145 degrees, ground meat to at least 160 degrees and poultry to a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees. Check temperatures with a meat thermometer.

When canning, only use researched and tested recipes, published after 1998 such as those found in WSU's [Fundamentals of Consumer Food Safety and Preservation: Master Handbook](#) or the [USDA Complete Guide to Home Canning](#).

Q: What's the best way for a consumer to get food safety answers?

If a consumer has food safety questions, they should contact their local county or tribal extension office first. Office locations can be found at <http://extension.wsu.edu/locations/>. If there isn't anyone who can answer their question at the local office, they should be referred to the WSU Food Safety line or email. Additionally, we have a [Facebook page](#) and [Twitter feed](#) where people can get timely tips, breaking news on recalls, or other information they need to be aware of.

- Contact Consumer Food Safety Specialist Stephanie Smith at (509) 335-0972 or by email at [steph.smith@wsu.edu](mailto:steph.smith@wsu.edu).

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