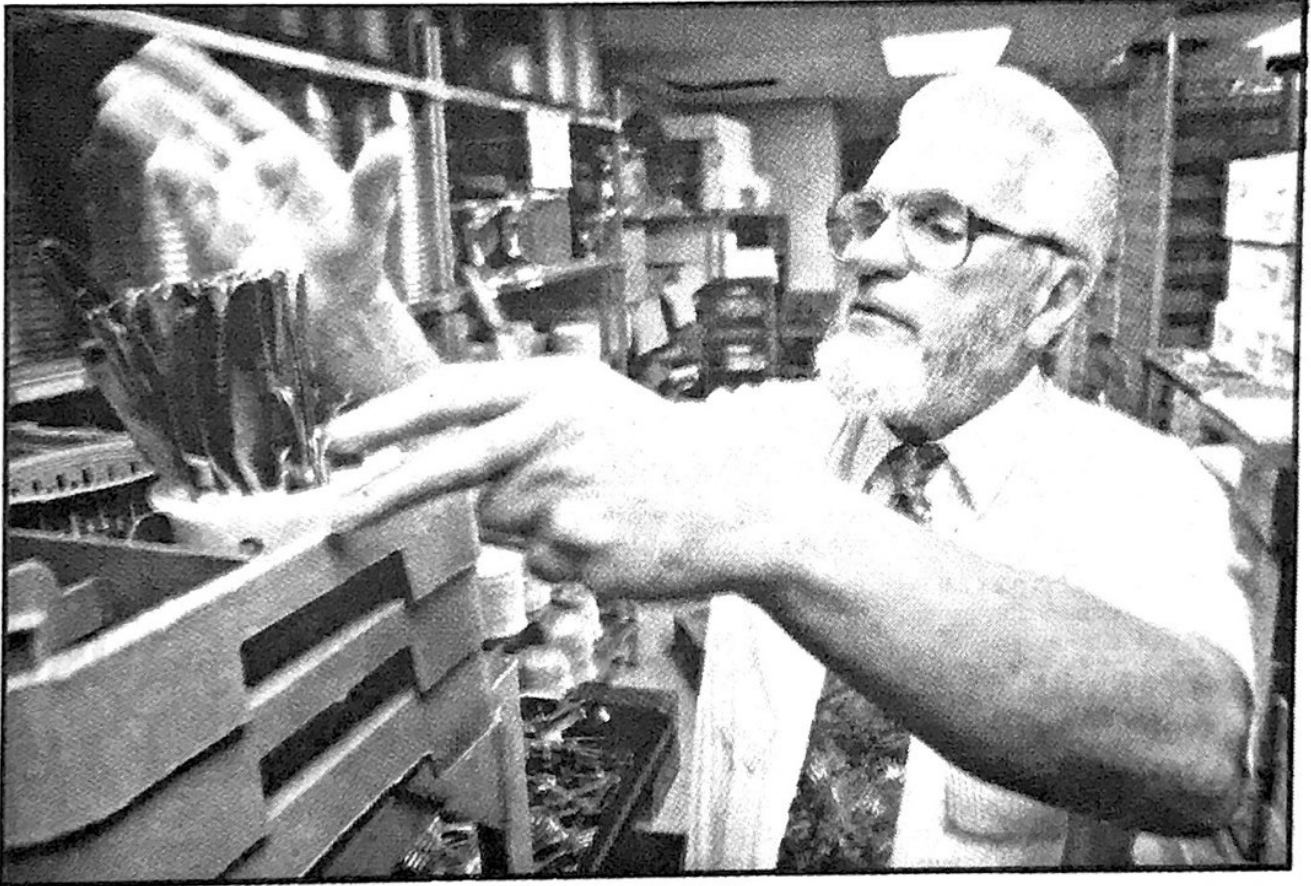


TOLEDO, OHIO, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 1995

SPECIAL REPORT

*Last of a four-part series*

BLADE PHOTO BY ALLAN DETRICH



Toledo diners rely on city health inspectors to make sure restaurants are clean and safe. Inspector John Neeper checks the silverware in the kitchen of the SeaGate Centre.

# LEARNING TO HEED THE WARNING SIGNS

BY SAM ROE  
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BLADE STAFF WRITERS

Clipboard in one hand, briefcase in the other, Toledo health inspector John Neeper marches into the SeaGate Convention Centre and makes an announcement many in food service would rather not hear: It's time for the annual inspection.

SeaGate manager Jon Gipe cringes.

"The kitchen is sort of torn apart," he says. "If you smell a foul odor, we were just cleaning the grease traps."

Inspector Neeper marches on, finding mildew on the cooler ceiling, crud on the can opener, and iodine stored too close to the salads.

"How many drops of that iodine do you think it would take to contaminate those salads?" he asks, writing up the violation.

In the end, the SeaGate Centre is zinged several times — not a bad showing, Mr. Neeper says, given the size of the kitchen.

For inspectors, discerning which kitchens are safe and which ones are not is relatively simple. After all, they're allowed beyond the "Staff Only" doors and can see firsthand whether there are rats, roaches, or reams of dirt.

But what about the customers? How can they tell if their favorite restaurants are safe to eat in?

Not to worry, health officials say. There are several tricks of the trade:

► If you suspect rats, look for grease marks along baseboards. Rats keep to the walls when scurrying about.

## WHO'S WATCHING



## THE KITCHEN?

► Some coffee creamers are dairy products that shouldn't be sitting out at room temperature; if they are, don't use them.

► Look closely at the soup. "If it's hot enough," Mr. Neeper says, "it loses all of its film. It looks kind of shiny on top."

Other tips are common sense:

If "hot" food is warm, send it back. If there is old food or lipstick on your dishes, send them back. If the kitchen workers look filthy, get up and walk out.

"Don't be afraid to complain to the manager," Mr. Neeper says. "If three or four people do that a day, the manager will start checking on the problems himself."

All diners take some risk, however small, when eating out. This may be particularly true in Toledo, where inspectors are not checking all restaurants at least once a year — a violation of state law.

For concerned diners, the first step may be to check the public records of their favorite spots.

The records, available at the Toledo Health Department, 635 North Erie St., show the last time a restaurant was inspected, the violations found, and how many complaints have been received.

Beyond that, diners should develop a sharp eye.

And there may be no better way to do that than by shadowing a city inspector.

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# Signs

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On this day John Neeper, a 28-year inspection veteran, gets the call.

With a neat white beard and slight paunch, Mr. Neeper, 66, climbs into his rusty city car, shoves a bottle of antacid aside ("I take myself too seriously"), and heads to his first assignment: the SeaGate Centre.

There, acting general manager Jon Gipe leads him to the kitchen, where Mr. Neeper ties a strip of heat-sensitive paper to a fork and sets it on the dishwashing conveyor belt.

A minute later, the fork rolls out, and the paper is black — a sign the water is hot enough to kill bacteria.

Customers can't do this, but they can look for spots on their dishes.

"If you can't see any spots," Mr. Neeper says, holding a glass up to the light, "it got to the right temperature."

Over at the ice machine, he looks for mildew. "Know why this is important?" he asks. "Because ice is a food product."

That means eateries should never store bottles — some which may be dirty — in bins holding ice used for drinks. Still, bars do it all the time.

In the SeaGate lobby, Mr. Neeper checks a drinking fountain. The water barely dribbles out.

"I want a six-inch arc on this," he says to Mr. Gipe. "I don't like drinking off everyone else's lips."

Mr. Gipe says the inspection doesn't bother him.

"He just tells us what needs to be fixed, and it's my job then to see that it is corrected."

When the inspection is over, and Mr. Neeper is back in his car, he says he trusts the manager will fix the problems.

"I can't read minds, but I can read attitudes."

At the next stop, the Toledo Museum of Art, Mr. Neeper strolls down the cafeteria line.



**Inspector Konni Sutfield, left, discusses a recent inspection of UT's International House kitchen with manager Rafael Aponte.**

On his right are pans holding beef. But they are not touching the water underneath to keep it hot. That's a violation.

Nearby is another: The pie cooler reads 55 degrees — 10 degrees too high.

"Your food can go bad anywhere between 45 and 140," he says. "The closer it gets to body temperature, the more the bacteria is volatile."

This is a problem consumers can head off.

"If you see a refrigerator dial in the green section, it's OK. If it's in the red section, it's bad.

"I used to insist that my steak was pink in the middle," he adds, "but not anymore — not with the advent of E. coli bacteria. Meat needs to be brown all the way through."

Back downtown, Mr. Neeper strolls into the Brunch House cafeteria in the Federal Building.

"Time for your annual inspection," he announces to operator Deborah Saunders. "Where's your food license?"

"Right there," she says, pointing to several documents taped to the refrigerator.

"Where's the green one."

"What green one?"

"The green one for 1995."

"Everything I got in the mail is up there," she says.

He writes down the violation: "1995 license not on premises this date."

Licenses must be prominently displayed, he says, to allay diners' fears that the eatery is not a fly-by-night operation — a common problem years ago.

The day's last stop: the K & P Market, a grocery at Oakwood and Detroit avenues.

Inside, Mr. Neeper gingerly

climbs three greasy steps and peers into the bathroom.

"Filth!" he exclaims.

The toilet is streaked with yellow stains, a can of beer is in the sink, and a dried bowl of spaghetti is on the toilet.

Mr. Neeper writes up the violation, then heads back down the greasy steps.

"Out of my way," he says, "so I can fall on my own."

Driving back to the office, Mr. Neeper says Toledo's food establishments are, by and large, clean and that diners shouldn't worry.

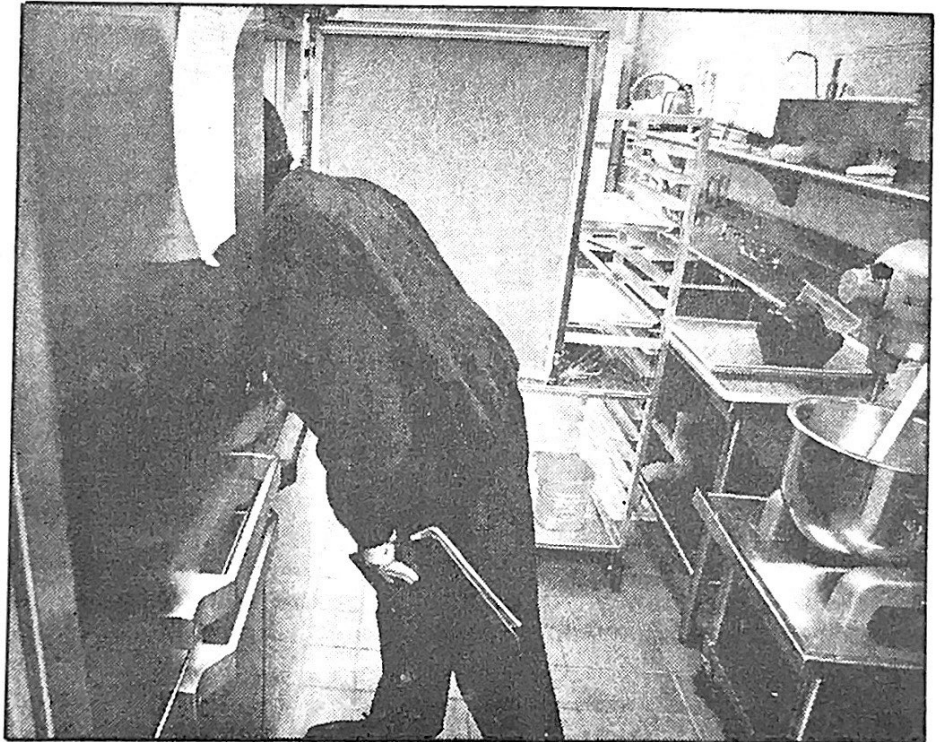
But come January, when new state rules kick in, he doesn't know what the city will do.

Inspectors will be required to hit some eateries three times a year. Now, they can't even get to all of them once a year.

The problem is so dire, he says, that Toledo's inspection unit may have to merge with that of Lucas County.

"There will be changes," he says, "one way or the other."

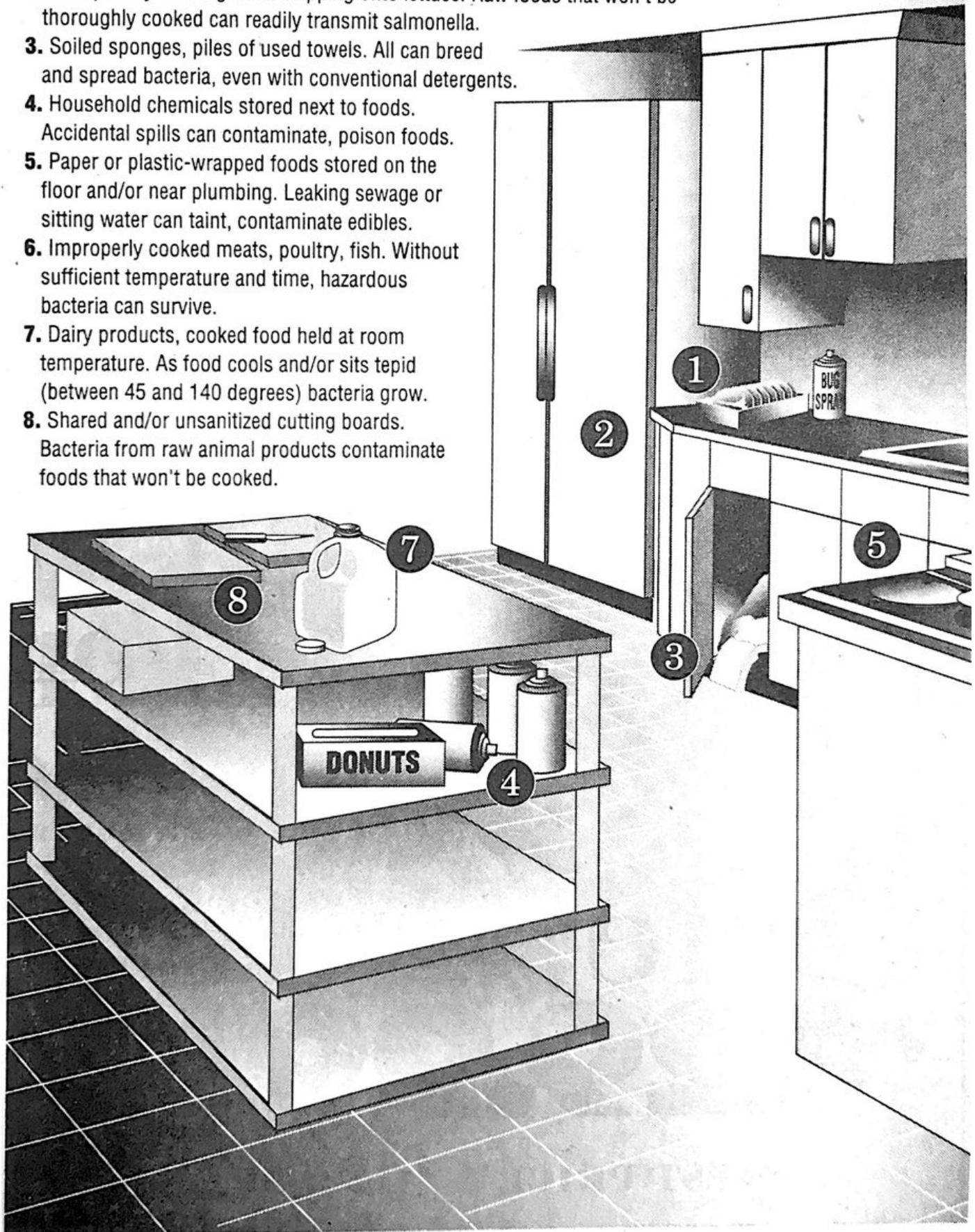
BLADE PHOTO BY ALLAN DETRICH

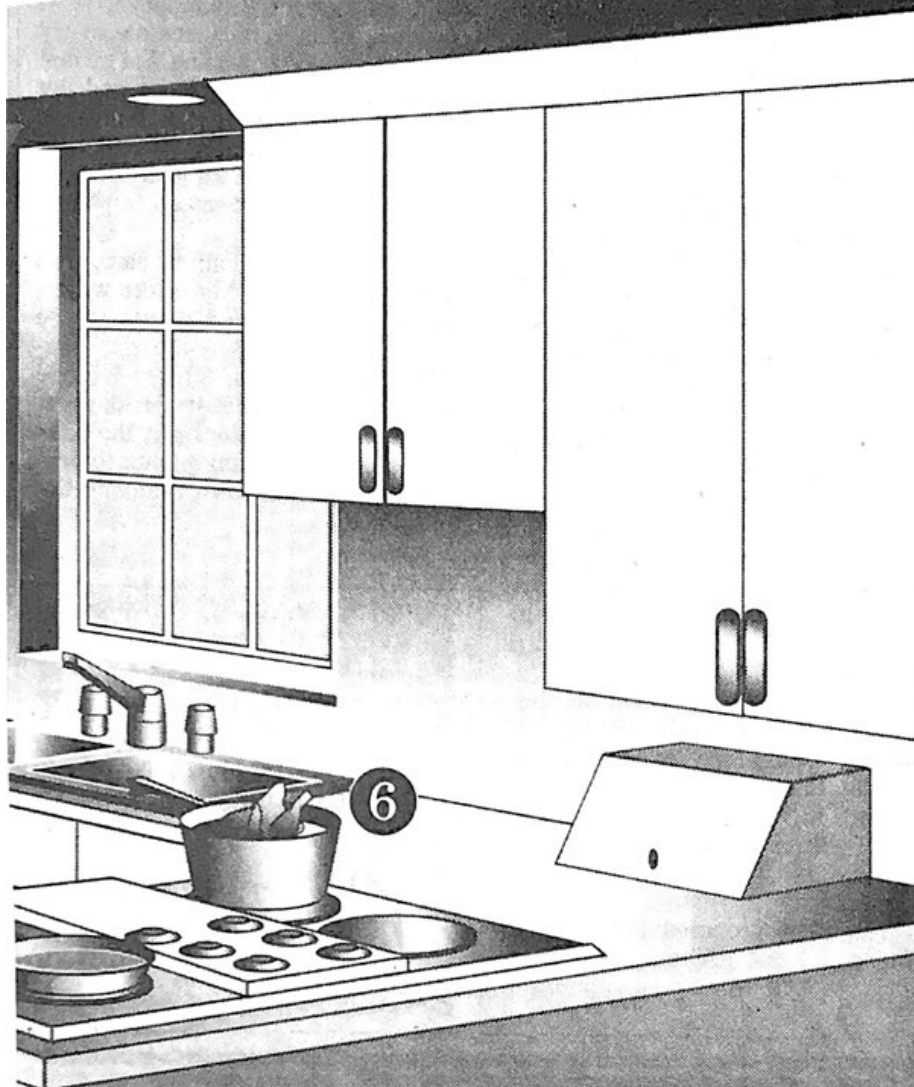


**Keeping cold foods cold is important. Inspector Sutfield checks the cooler in the kitchen of UT's International House.**

## DANGER ZONES: Reducing the risk of food-borne illness in the kitchen

1. Meat thawing on counter top. Bacteria flourish and spread at room temperatures.
2. Raw poultry in refrigerator dripping onto lettuce. Raw foods that won't be thoroughly cooked can readily transmit salmonella.
3. Soiled sponges, piles of used towels. All can breed and spread bacteria, even with conventional detergents.
4. Household chemicals stored next to foods. Accidental spills can contaminate, poison foods.
5. Paper or plastic-wrapped foods stored on the floor and/or near plumbing. Leaking sewage or sitting water can taint, contaminate edibles.
6. Improperly cooked meats, poultry, fish. Without sufficient temperature and time, hazardous bacteria can survive.
7. Dairy products, cooked food held at room temperature. As food cools and/or sits tepid (between 45 and 140 degrees) bacteria grow.
8. Shared and/or unsanitized cutting boards. Bacteria from raw animal products contaminate foods that won't be cooked.





### TEN TOP TOOLS FOR SAFER FOOD PREPARATION

- 1. Multiple cutting boards** (One for meat, another for vegetables or foods to be served raw)
- 2. Quick-read meat thermometer** (Safely check internal food temperatures)
- 3. Timer** (Better to regulate, monitor cooking times)
- 4. Oven thermometer** (Accurately check cooking temperatures)
- 5. Antibacterial hand soap, finger brush** (Complete elimination of skin-borne bacteria that can spread to foods)
- 6. Bleach, other household/kitchen disinfectants** (Sanitize counters, sinks, surfaces to reduce transfer of germs)
- 7. Freshly laundered dish towels and hand towels** (Provide hygienic material for hand and dish drying)
- 8. Paper towels** (Safely wipe up spills without spreading bacteria)
- 9. New sponges, dishcloths** (Replaced and laundered daily to eliminate bacteria, prevent breeding ground)
- 10. Solid, sealed, and airtight food storage containers** (Reduce risk of contamination, attack by vermin)