

Fire up the barbecue: hot dogs, hamburgers, severed tendon?

The barbecue season is now well underway.

Experts from Southlake Regional Health Centre's Hand Program are reminding grill enthusiasts to be careful when trying to separate frozen meat for the barbecue, and offer important safety tips on how to avoid an unnecessary surgery leading up to the last long weekend of the summer.

“Using a knife or other sharp object to separate frozen meats, such as hot dogs, ribs, or hamburgers, can lead to a significant hand injury,” said Southlake Chief of Staff and Plastic Surgeon Dr. Steven Beatty. “Each year, our Hand Program sees close to 30 cases of severe hand injuries from knife-related incidents.”

These injuries are often very serious, requiring a combination of both surgery and intense treatment with recovery times of up to four months “with significant restrictions on the use of the entire hand, not just the finger.

Beatty cautions that even a dull object like a butter knife can be responsible for some of the worst injuries. No one knows the damage a butter knife can cause like Erik Bitner. Five years ago, Bitner sliced the flexor tendon “the muscle that helps bend the finger” in his right pinky finger on a butter knife when trying to separate frozen hot dogs for dinner. He believed his cut was minor, so he avoided treatment but spent the following week in pain, unable to use his hand.

“I knew it was bad when I couldn't hold my hockey stick,” he said. “I had to tape my stick to my hockey glove during a game because I couldn't bend my finger at all.”

Bitner left hockey and went straight to the emergency department at Stevenson Memorial Hospital in Alliston, where he was referred to the Hand Program at Southlake. He was assessed by Dr. Beatty, who quickly identified that Bitner needed surgery and months of intense rehabilitation to repair the damaged flexor tendon and to enable him to recover full hand movement.

“Flexor tendons are like elastic bands and are under a tremendous amount of tension from the muscles in the forearms,” Beatty said.

“One small and simple cut can cause the tendons to retract like an elastic and the finger can lose its ability to move and bend.”

Beatty and Hand Program Occupational Therapist Kathryn Wilton agree that safely preparing meat to barbecue is serious business “especially if you want to avoid a hospital visit. They recommend the following important safety measures before starting the activity.

“Focus on the task” Many hand injuries caused by a knife or sharp object occur in the kitchen, often when the individual is in a rush or trying to do too many things at once. Focus on the task, and never multi-task while holding a knife or sharp object.

“Never direct a knife or sharp object at any body part” While it may seem like common sense, it's important to remember that a sharp object should never be directed at any part of your body, including your hands.

“Ensure your hands are dry” A clean and dry environment to prepare food is crucial. Many of Southlake's Hand Program patients admit that their hands were wet when they incurred their injury.

“Pre-plan meals and err on the side of caution” Pre-planning weekly meals not only helps to organize a busy life, but it can also, and more importantly, helps prevent a serious injury, surgery, months of rehabilitation and the inconveniences associated with treatment. Spend time thinking about meals throughout the week, and take the necessary steps to ensure the ingredients are ready. Frozen meat like hot dogs and hamburgers should be safely defrosted to avoid having to use force to separate them.

“Seek treatment immediately” The risk of infection can be high and the longer the injury goes untreated, the less chance there is to fully recover from it.

According to Wilton, there is a significant spike in the incidence of hand injuries during certain times of the year, like holidays and barbecue season.

“We definitely see an increase in patients with hand injuries around the times when people are cutting turkeys, carving pumpkins, and trying to separate frozen meat for the barbecue,” Wilton said. “Workplace injuries aside, these accidents almost always happen during housekeeping and homemaking activities.”

To view Southlake's Public Service Announcement on safely separating frozen meat for the barbecue, visit the Hospital's YouTube channel.