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Current home canning practices in the U.S.

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Home canning is a traditionally popular means of preserving seasonal produce or specialty foods. The last comprehensive survey of practices conducted by USDA was in the 1970s. Significant lapses in appropriate techniques were documented and later survey reports by others have not revealed major shifts toward improved practices. Computer listservs and the large commercial book industry have the potential for more widespread sharing of traditional and possibly unsafe techniques than ever before.

The objective was to conduct interviews with individuals primarily responsible for household food preparation, to determine their activity level in home canning and use of critical safety practices.

Between October 24, 2000 and January 10, 2001, trained interviewers at the Survey Research Center, University of Georgia, recorded 135 complete telephone interviews from households randomly selected across the nation. The 38-item interview included questions about the respondent's source of canning instructions, methods used, types and quantities of foods canned, containers and equipment used, equipment testing procedures, success of canning procedures and spoilage.

Survey results indicated that friends or relatives (48%) and cookbooks (19%) were the most popular sources of canning instructions. Vegetables were canned by 71%; tomatoes/tomato products by 60%; and fruits by 47%. The boiling water canner was the most frequently used processing method with 58% and 39.5% using it to can fruits (including tomatoes) or vegetables respectively. A pressure-based canner was used by 34% and 49% using it to can fruits or vegetables respectively. Only 24% had the dial gauge on their pressure canner tested. Recommended jars were used by 74%. Only 5.2% reported spoilage of home canned foods.

Greater adoption of science-based home canning techniques is still needed by consumers, particularly in the selection of appropriate processing temperatures, equipment and supplies. Findings document practices and knowledge that should be targeted in educational programs.