

HOLIDAY FOOD SAFETY

The holidays are a time for delicious feasts...not stomach upset. Food safety is especially important during these times, as food is being served in large amounts and in unique displays. Proper storing, cooking, and displaying large volumes of food will help prevent foodborne illness.

Precautions to take for a holiday buffet. Buffets are festive and fun, so make sure to take extra care during planning, preparing, and serving your holiday fare. First, decide how many guests you can safely serve. Take refrigerator space into consideration.



Remember that the longer food items are left on the buffet table the longer foodborne illness bacteria have to multiply. Keep buffet servings small and replenish them often. Keep cold foods at 41°F or less and hot foods at 135°F or more. Never leave food at room temperature for more than two hours, unless you are going to throw out the leftovers.

How can you tell if food is safe to eat? It is not always possible to tell by taste, look, or odor if a food is safe to eat. Meat, poultry, and dairy products left at room temperature allow bacteria to grow to dangerous numbers. These bacteria rarely change the taste, look, or odor of food. If you know, or suspect that food has been left out for four hours or handled carelessly, throw it out. **Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.**

Holiday foods which should be given special attention. The majority of foodborne illnesses during holidays come from dishes such as meat trays, stuffing, potato salad (mayonnaise based salads), cream and custard pies, and eggnog. All these dishes contain meat, poultry, eggs, or dairy products and tend to be handled more than other foods during preparation. Bacteria transfer very easily from hands to food. Wash your hands between tasks and use clean utensils when preparing these foods. Refrigerate foods immediately if you prepare them ahead of time.

Turkey stuffing. The safest method to cook stuffing is separate from the bird. Bacteria grow rapidly in warm, moist environments. The inside of a turkey is a great environment for bacterial growth, as the thick meat protects the bacteria from extreme heat or cold. If you choose to stuff your turkey, mix the stuffing in advance and refrigerate it separately from the bird. Stuff the bird just before cooking and cook until both the thickest part of the meat and interior of the stuffing reach 165°F. Use a meat thermometer to check the temperature. Remove all leftover stuffing from the bird and refrigerate.



Does thorough cooking eliminate the danger of foodborne illness? NO!

Although cooking kills most bacteria, bacteria can spread to food again after it has been cooled. Bacteria can transfer from raw to cooked foods if they come in contact with each other. Bacteria spread from hands to food and from soiled utensils to food. Remember that bacteria from meat and poultry can spread to foods you don't normally cook (i.e. using the same knife or cutting board on produce without washing it first).



Prevent the spread of bacteria. Wash your hands and kitchen utensils with soap and hot water after handling one food and before moving on to another. Never use the same cutting board for cooked foods and produce that you used for raw meat or poultry. Wash the cutting board and utensils with soap and hot water between uses.

Preparing holiday dishes ahead of time. Place prepared ahead foods in the refrigerator within 30 minutes after cooking. Reheat foods to 165°F before serving. Refrigerate cold dishes immediately after preparation.

Advance purchase of groceries. When purchasing large quantities of groceries for the holidays, be sure to use fresh meat and poultry products within three days of purchase and keep them well refrigerated. Freeze fresh meat and poultry if you plan to keep them longer.

Thawing meat and poultry. Allow time to thaw frozen foods in the refrigerator. *Thawing at room temperature or in warm water is unsafe.* If it is necessary to thaw a large turkey or other piece of meat outside the refrigerator, it may be thawed in a water-tight package under cold running water. Cook immediately after thawing.



Foodborne illness can cause diarrhea, vomiting, stomach cramps and other unpleasant symptoms which can last for several hours or even days. Don't let foodborne illness ruin your holiday season!

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