



# NEWS

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## **Holiday Food Safety Tips from the Montgomery County Health Department**

**Norristown, PA (November 15, 2013)** – The holiday season is fast approaching. Many kitchens will be working overtime and many helping hands will be pitching in to prepare the perfect meal. Unfortunately, this is also the time of year when food borne illnesses increase. Some of the most common holiday practices may allow for harmful bacteria to grow on foods.

During the holidays, it is common to prepare larger meals that are served over extended periods of time. Distracted by guests, and in no hurry to clean up or put away leftovers, food is left out at room temperature for longer periods of time. Food left out at room temperature can allow for the growth of harmful bacteria responsible for food borne illnesses.

Some holiday guests are at a greater risk for food borne illness. Children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems or chronic illnesses are all more susceptible to food borne illness. There are a number of preventive measures that can be adopted to protect family and guests from food borne illnesses during the holidays and all year long.

The good news is that most food borne illnesses can be prevented. Bacteria multiply on food that is mishandled during storage, preparation, cooking, and serving. Some safe food handling practices include adequate hand washing, storing and preparing food and ingredients at proper temperatures, and avoiding cross-contamination.

Follow these simple steps to ensure a safe and delicious meal.

### **PLAN AHEAD**

- Plan the menu and portions several weeks in advance.

- Ensure there is enough refrigeration space for all foods; Putting large amounts of food in the refrigerator at one time can cause the refrigerator temperature to become unsafe.

## STORAGE

- Make sure the refrigerator is below 41°F and the freezer is at or below 0°F. Check the temperature with a thermometer.
- Always refrigerate perishable foods within two hours, and within one hour when the food temperature is above 90°F.
- Meats and poultry should be wrapped securely to prevent juices from getting onto other foods and should be stored below ready to eat foods.

## PREPARATION

- Always wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after touching foods.
- Avoid cross contamination: keep raw meat, poultry, fish, and their juices away from other food. Between uses, wash and sanitize cutting boards, dishes, utensils, and counter tops. Use one capful of bleach per gallon of water or another commercial sanitizer.
- Keep two cutting boards handy, one for raw meats and one for cooked foods or ready to eat foods like salads.
- Never put cooked food on a plate used for raw meat, poultry, or seafood.
- Use separate utensils for raw foods and ready to eat foods.
- Keep pets out of the kitchen during preparation.
- Do not prepare food if feeling ill.
- When preparing eggnog, hollandaise sauce, Caesar-salad dressing, or other recipes that call for raw or under cooked eggs, use a pasteurized egg product instead of eggs.
- Clean and sanitize surfaces promptly after food preparation.

## THAWING

- Never thaw meats on the counter and avoid thawing meats at room temperature. The surface of the meat can reach temperatures that allow for bacteria growth while the inside remains frozen.
- Thaw frozen meat and poultry in the bottom of the refrigerator in a tray to prevent dripping juices (24 hours per five pounds), under cold running water in the sink, or in a cold water bath where the water must be replaced every 30 minutes, allowing about 30 minutes per pound.
- Microwave thawing is safe if the product is not too large; Follow the manufacturer's instructions and cook immediately after thawing.

## STUFFING

- Cooking stuffing in the turkey is riskier than cooking the stuffing in a casserole dish. Harmful bacteria can survive in stuffing when not uniformly cooked to 165°F.
- Keep wet and dry ingredients separate and refrigerated until preparation.
- Loosely stuff the turkey; Stuffing should be moist. Heat destroys bacteria faster in moist environments.
- Cook turkey immediately after stuffing and check the temperature in the center of the stuffing to ensure it has reached at least 165°F.
- Remove all stuffing after cooking.

## TURKEY COOKING BASICS

- Set the oven temperature no lower than 325°F.
- Cook whole turkeys to 165°F, using a meat thermometer (do not touch the bone) in the area of the thigh, wing, and thickest part of the breast.
- If the turkey has a pop up indicator, use a thermometer to ensure uniform cooking temperatures.
- A stuffed turkey takes longer to cook than an un-stuffed turkey, read the manufacturer's label for approximate cooking times.

## SERVING

- Do not leave perishable foods out at room temperature.
- If perishable foods cannot be kept cold or hot, serve in small bowls or trays and replace them often.
- Keep hot food at 135°F or higher and cold foods at 41°F or lower. Use crock-pots, oven, warming trays, refrigerator, coolers, or ice trays.
- Store leftovers immediately after your meal; Perishable food must not remain at room temperatures for more than two hours. Use shallow trays for refrigeration.
- Smaller portions will allow for quicker chilling.

## LEFTOVERS

- Reheat cooked leftovers to 165°F until hot and steaming. Sauces, soups, and gravies should be brought to a rolling boil.
- When microwaving leftovers, cover and rotate the dish so that it reheats evenly.
- Refrigerated leftovers should be eaten within four days.

Remember by taking a few precautions, food poisoning can be kept from becoming an uninvited guest at the holiday table. Most food borne illness is caused by poor temperature control or cross contamination. Keep surfaces clean, keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot, thoroughly cook stuffing and turkey, and enjoy the holiday meal.