

Safety Tips for Preparing Holiday Feasts

What would the holidays be without a sumptuous family feast? But, as you prepare that large meal, you should take precautions to prevent food borne illness. The Lake County Health Department/Community Health Center offers the following food safety tips to help ensure your holiday meals are prepared in a safe manner.

The meal should be planned days in advance, especially if you need to thaw large quantities of frozen food. The safest way to thaw frozen food is in a refrigerator at 41° F or below. Be aware though, that if you are thawing something large (say a 20-pound turkey) you must allow enough time for it to thaw completely. It takes approximately 24 hours for each five pounds of frozen food to thaw in a refrigerator, so a 20-pound turkey will take three to four days to completely thaw. Never thaw your food at room temperature. The outside of the food will be warm while the inside is still frozen, allowing potentially disease-causing bacteria to grow.

After thawing, the turkey may be cleaned and trimmed, and the stuffing may be prepared. It's a good idea to cook the stuffing separate from the turkey. Stuffing placed inside a turkey during cooking may not reach the required 165° F and could cause an illness.

Poultry and stuffed foods should be cooked so that they reach an internal temperature of at least 165° F; cook meat and fish to at least 145° F; cook pork, ground meats and ground fish to at least 155° F. If you are cooking a beef roast and like it rare, it should be cooked to at least 130° for 121 minutes. A very important, and inexpensive piece of equipment that every kitchen should have is a metal stem thermometer, which is available at any grocery store. How else will you know if your food is cooked to the proper temperature if you don't use a thermometer? Don't rely on guessing.

When preparing a holiday feast, or any meal, you should remember to frequently wash your hands during food preparation. Always wash your hands after using the restroom, when switching between working with raw food (such as poultry) and working with ready-to-eat food (such as vegetables or cooked foods), after touching parts of your body, after handling soiled equipment or utensils, and after coughing, sneezing, eating, drinking or smoking. Hands should be washed for about 20 seconds (about the amount of time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice) with soap and warm water by vigorously rubbing the hands together.

You should also take precautions to avoid cross-contamination. Cross contamination is the transfer of harmful microorganisms (germs) from one food to another. Contaminated hands, utensils or equipment can transfer microorganisms. Examples of cross-contamination are handling raw poultry or meats, and then handling some other food with juice from the meat or poultry still on your hands, or cutting raw poultry with a knife, then using that knife to cut vegetables without first washing the knife. That's why it is important to frequently wash hands, counters and cooking utensils as a meal is prepared.

Once the meal is over, cool down leftovers to 41° F or below within six hours. The best way to do this is to place the leftover food in shallow pans (no thicker than three inches) before placing it in the refrigerator or freezer. Also, slice large cuts of meat and de-bone poultry before cooling or freezing. Avoid leaving leftovers out at room temperature once the meal is over.

Food borne illnesses can be serious enough to require hospitalization and may even be fatal. Regardless of the size of the meal being prepared, safe food handling principles and practices should always be applied to assure that you offer great meals and prevent food-related illnesses.