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Food Safety During the Holidays

Food is an important part of many holiday celebrations. But don't let food-related illness ruin your holiday.

Food safety boils down to three basic rules:

- Keep hot food hot and cold food cold.
- Keep everything in the kitchen clean.
- Wash hands frequently.

Refrigerate cooked foods that are not served immediately. If food is left unrefrigerated longer than two hours, the chance of bacterial growth increases. Check your refrigerator to make sure it is at 41° F or less.

PREVENT BACTERIA FROM GETTING INTO FOOD

- Hands should always be thoroughly washed with soap and warm water before handling food.
- Towels and wash cloths should be kept clean. Sponges are known for harboring bacteria, so eliminate or limit their use in the kitchen.
- Counter tops and utensils should be washed with hot, soapy water between each step in food preparation.

PROPER THAWING AND COOKING

Many warm-blooded animals, turkeys and other poultry often harbor Salmonella and other organisms that can cause food-related illness. Purchased and packaged meats, too, can be contaminated with these organisms. Proper thawing and cooking are important to avoid these illnesses. The following precautions should be taken:

- Store all raw meat products on the bottom shelf or separate from other food products in your refrigerator especially during the thawing process. This will help keep raw meat juices from contaminating other foods.
- Start early and thaw turkey in a refrigerator or in a place where the air temperature is no higher than 41° F. A 20-pound turkey will take about three days to thaw completely in a refrigerator.
- It is safer and preferred that stuffing be cooked separately. However, if you do stuff the bird, do so just before cooking it. Stuff it loosely so the stuffing cooks thoroughly. Remember to wash hands before stuffing the bird.
- Be sure poultry reaches the temperature of 165° F or above to make sure it is cooked thoroughly.
- Use a meat thermometer to check the temperature. Insert the thermometer into the thickest part of the meat, avoiding fat and bone. For poultry, insert it into the thick part of the thigh next to the body.
- Wash and rinse the thermometer between uses to prevent possible contamination.
- Cook meat and poultry completely without interrupting the cooking process; an interruption could allow bacteria to grow.

LEFTOVERS

- After the meal, immediately refrigerate leftovers such as meat, dressing, gravy or soups in small shallow containers.
- Do not allow foods to sit several hours at room temperature as this will provide time for the growth of disease-causing bacteria. Refrigerate stuffing and other items separately from the bird.
- Do not cool leftovers on the kitchen counter. Divide them into smaller portions so they will cool more quickly and put them in the refrigerator as soon as possible.
- Serve leftovers either very cold (directly from the refrigerator) or very hot (heated to 165° F or higher).

- Cover leftovers to reheat. This helps maintain moisture and ensures that meat is heated thoroughly.
- Eat refrigerated turkey within three to four days and stuffing and gravy within one to two days.

When made with raw products, there are some foods that should be avoided altogether. These include oysters and egg drinks, mousse or bread pudding, unless made with pasteurized eggs or an egg substitute. Young children, the elderly, pregnant women and those who are ill or whose immune systems are compromised should not eat raw or undercooked animal products or raw oysters unless they have consulted their physician.

For more information or questions please contact Terry Eimen, Director of Environmental Health. 815-432-2483.