

Food Safety Tips for Healthy Holidays

Parties, family dinners, and other gatherings where food is served are all part of the holiday cheer. But the merriment can change to misery if food makes you or others ill.

Typical symptoms of foodborne illness are vomiting, diarrhea, and flu-like symptoms, which can start anywhere from hours to days after contaminated food or drinks are consumed.

The symptoms usually are not long-lasting in healthy people—a few hours or a few days—and usually go away without medical treatment. But foodborne illness can be severe and even life-threatening to anyone, especially those most at risk:

- older adults
- infants and young children
- pregnant women
- people with HIV/AIDS, cancer, or any condition that weakens their immune system
- people who take medicines that suppress the immune system; for example, some medicines for rheumatoid arthritis

Combating bacteria, viruses, parasites, and other contaminants in our food supply is a high priority for the Food and Drug Administration. But consumers have a role to play, too, especially when it comes to safe food handling practices in the home.

“The good news is that practicing four basic food safety measures can



1. Clean:

The first rule of safe food preparation!

2. Separate:

Don't give bacteria the opportunity to spread!

3. Cook:

Kill harmful bacteria!

4. Chill:

Refrigerate foods quickly!

help prevent foodborne illness,” says Marjorie Davidson, a consumer educator at FDA.

1. Clean: The first rule of safe food preparation in the home is to keep everything clean.

- Wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after

handling any food. “For children, this means the time it takes to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ twice,” says Davidson.

- Wash food-contact surfaces (cutting boards, dishes, utensils, countertops) with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before going on to the next item.

- Rinse fruits and vegetables thoroughly under cool running water and use a produce brush to remove surface dirt.
- Do not rinse raw meat and poultry before cooking. “Washing these foods makes it more likely for bacteria to spread to areas around the sink and countertops,” says Davidson.

2. Separate: Don’t give bacteria the opportunity to spread from one food to another (cross-contamination).

- Keep raw eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, and their juices away from foods that won’t be cooked. Take this precaution while shopping in the store, when storing in the refrigerator at home, and while preparing meals.
- Consider using one cutting board only for foods that will be cooked (such as raw meat, poultry, and seafood) and another one for those that will not (such as raw fruits and vegetables).
- Keep fruits and vegetables that will be eaten raw separate from other foods such as raw meat, poultry, or seafood—and from kitchen utensils used for those products.
- Do not put cooked meat or other food that is ready to eat on an unwashed plate that has held any raw eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, or their juices.

3. Cook: Food is safely cooked when it reaches a high enough internal temperature to kill harmful bacteria.

- “Color is not a reliable indicator of doneness,” says Davidson. Use a food thermometer to make sure meat, poultry, and fish are cooked to a safe internal temperature. To check a turkey for safety, insert a food thermometer into the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. The turkey is safe when the temperature reaches 165°F. If the turkey is stuffed, the temperature of the stuffing should be 165°F. (Please read on for more on stuffing.)
- Bring sauces, soups, and gravies to a rolling boil when reheating.
- Cook eggs until the yolk and white



are firm. When making your own eggnog or other recipe calling for raw eggs, use pasteurized shell eggs, liquid or frozen pasteurized egg products, or powdered egg whites.

- Don’t eat uncooked cookie dough, which may contain raw eggs.

4. Chill: Refrigerate foods quickly because harmful bacteria grow rapidly at room temperature.

- Refrigerate leftovers and takeout foods—and any type of food that should be refrigerated—within two hours. That includes pumpkin pie!
- Set your refrigerator at or below 40°F and the freezer at 0°F. Check both periodically with an appliance thermometer.
- Never defrost food at room temperature. Food can be defrosted safely in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or in the microwave. Food thawed in cold water or in the microwave should be cooked immediately.
- Allow the correct amount of time to properly thaw food. For example, a 20-pound turkey needs four to five days to thaw completely when thawed in the refrigerator.
- Don’t taste food that looks or smells questionable. Davidson says, “A good rule to follow is, when in doubt, throw it out.”
- Leftovers should be used within three to four days.

Use care with stuffing

In its Holiday Food Safety Success Kit, the Partnership for Food Safety Education (at HolidayFoodSafety.org) recommends:

- Whether it is cooked inside or outside the bird, all stuffing and dressing must be cooked to a minimum temperature of 165 °F. For optimum safety, cooking your stuffing in a casserole dish is recommended.
- Stuffing should be prepared and stuffed into the turkey immediately before it’s placed in the oven
- Mix wet and dry ingredients for the stuffing separately and combine just before using
- The turkey should be stuffed loosely, about 3/4 cup stuffing per pound of turkey
- Any extra stuffing should be baked in a greased casserole dish

The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers more information on stuffing safety at its Turkey Basics Web page (www.fsis.usda.gov/fact_sheets/Turkey_Basics_Stuffing/index.asp).

Information on food safety is available by phone at:

The FDA Food Information Line
1-888-SAFEFOOD (1-888-723-3366)

The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline
1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)
TTY 1-800-256-7072

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