HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

THANKSGIVING DINNER:
IF WE COOK IT, CAN WE EAT IT?

“Hey, what’s this plastic thing holding the legs together on our turkey? Is it safe to eat the turkey if we cook the plastic too? Oops, I also just found the giblets in a bag at the other end! If you have these, or other potential disasters taking the thanks out of your Thanksgiving cooking efforts, you can always call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline’s toll-free number at 1-888-MPHotline (888-674-6854).

Or, you can anticipate some of the questions that get asked, and avoid the busy signal on Thanksgiving Day. Better yet, use this article as a reminder to avoid mistakes in the first place.

The “plastic thing” on the turkey legs is the hock lock. It secures the hind legs, or hock, of a chicken or turkey. It can be made of heat-resistant nylon or metal, and it’s perfectly safe to leave it in the bird while it roasts. It will, however, be more difficult to get the bird done evenly, especially in the leg joints if the legs are locked or trussed together.

Those hock locks are just one of many functional items made from a variety of plastics, metal, paper, and cotton that producers may use on their products. They must keep documentation on file that the materials are safe for the intended or expected use with meat and poultry.

However, not all items found on food are safe to cook, and cooks don’t always read cooking instructions. By mistake, consumers have left the paper, or plastic wrapped giblets inside the turkey during cooking, neglected to take the plastic protector off ham bones, and “cooked” the absorbent paper and plastic pads packaged under meat in foam trays.

How can you tell if the mistake was harmless? When do you need to serve leftovers rather than your freshly prepared dinner? Here are some answers from the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline.

Did you leave the giblets inside the turkey during cooking? This accidental practice may be safe. IF the bird has been cooked to a safe temperature, paper wrapped giblets are safe to eat. If packed in plastic and the bag has been altered or melted by the cooking process, do not use the giblets or the poultry because harmful chemicals may have migrated into the surrounding meat. If the plastic bag was not altered, the giblets and poultry should be safe to use as long as the meat is fully cooked.

Oops, forgot to take the plastic protector off the ham bone? The plastic bone guard covering the exposed bone is used to keep the bone from breaking the outer wrap. If left on the meat during cooking, a 325 or 350 degree oven temperature may not melt the plastic, but still give off an abnormal chemical odor or taste. Cutting away the meat around the exposed area will not necessarily solve this potential food safety problem. The amount of chemical that has been absorbed by the meat will be unknown and may penetrate the entire piece of meat, especially if the meat is cooked in a closed container. The USDA advises not to eat the ham; discard it. Sorry….but safe!

How about those pop-up temperature indicators? Pop-up indicators have been produced since 1965. They are constructed from food approved nylon and are reliable to within 1-2 degrees F if accurately placed in the product. It is advised that you also check with a conventional thermometer for verification.

Should I “net or not-net during cooking? The netting surrounding the meat product is to hold boned meat and poultry in a specific shape. It can be of a fabric, plastic, or plastic and rubber. The fabric
netting can be used with food; it may burn a bit if high heat is used, but there is no concern of transferring unsafe chemicals to the meat. Some plastics or plastic and rubber are made specifically for use in cooking but only if the label has specific cooking directions. If there are no cooking instructions, remove the net.

What if I “cooked” the absorbent paper and plastic pad that came under the meat in the foam tray? The absorbent pad is clearly not intended to be cooked; however, if this happens and the packaging materials remain unaltered (that is, not melted or coming apart), the cooked meat will not pose an imminent health hazard. If the packaging materials have melted or changed shape in some other way, do not eat the product.

Both whole or half, cooked, vacuum-packaged hams packaged in federally inspected plants and canned hams can be eaten cold just as they come from their packaging. If you want to reheat a cooked ham, follow package instructions.

And, to prevent food borne illness, remember that cooked foods served at room temperature should be discarded if not consumed within four hours. To insure safe food handling practices, refrigerate food within two hours if you plan to serve it again.

Joy Borgman
Osceola County Extension
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
jbor@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
November 18, 2007