This is the season of hustling and bustling, parties, hors d'oeuvres and gift giving. However, the last thing that you want to give your guests is a case of food-borne illness.

Turkey, ham, eggnog, pumpkin pie and many other dishes are all holiday favorites, but they are also the favorite place of bacteria.

Food safety is important all year, but during the holidays it becomes increasingly important. Generally during this time of year, we prepare larger meals, leave food, out of the refrigerator for longer periods and overload our fridges. The following are some important tips and guidelines that should be followed to ensure that no uninvited guest attend your holiday gathering.

The Central Florida Food Safety Education Partnership reminds everyone to always remember the four basics of food safety: clean, separate, cook and chill. All countertops, surfaces and utensils should be clean, including your hands. Always separate raw meats from ready-to-eat foods so cross-contamination does not occur.

Cook your foods to the proper internal temperature, especially meats and casseroles, using a meat thermometer to check them. Finally, chill your food promptly after serving; do not let it stay out longer than two hours. It is important that food does not sit out in the danger zone, 40-140°F, for more than two hours.

Food safety for your holiday meal begins with planning. Determine your menu and decide how you will serve your food.

Will you be able to keep hot foods at 140°F or above, and cold foods at 40°F or below if they will be out for more than two hours?

Use chafing dishes and replace food often to keep it hot, and use beds of ice, to keep cold foods cold. When shopping, pick up groceries last and do not leave food in the car.

Always check the expiration dates of products, and prevent raw juices from dripping onto other foods. If you are planning to buy a frozen turkey, you will need to do so four to five days in advance in order to properly thaw it.

Storing food for holiday meals can be a real challenge. During holidays we typically buy more food than usual and quite often different types of food than normal. Be especially careful that you do not overload your refrigerator.

Putting large amounts of hot food in your refrigerator at one time can cause your refrigerator temperature to become unsafe. You should have a thermometer in the refrigerator to ensure that the temperature is being kept at 40°F or below.

Your frozen turkey should then be thawed in the refrigerator allowing approximately 24 hours for every five pounds. If you forget to take your turkey out of the freezer in time to allow it to thaw in the refrigerator you can use the cold water method, submerging the turkey in cold water allowing approximately 30 minutes per pound to thaw. The key to this method is to use cold water and to change the water every 30 minutes.

When cooking your turkey, you can stuff it or leave it unstuffed. If cooking it stuffed, make sure that you allow extra time to cook. The stuffing should reach a minimum temperature of 165°F, and the turkey should reach a minimum of 180°F to be considered safely done.
These temperatures should be checked with a meat thermometer. Depending on the size of your turkey it may take anywhere from three to five hours to cook, always check the temperature for doneness in the thickest portion of the turkey without touching any bone.

The minimum suggested cooking temperature is 325°F. Overnight cooking is not recommended.

After dinner it is always important to put away all leftovers promptly, remembering the two-hour rule. All meat should be cut off the bone and placed in shallow dishes. All other leftovers should also be placed in shallow containers and refrigerated promptly. You should use your leftover turkey and stuffing within three to four days and gravy within one or two days.

If you are not going to use them in this time frame, consider dividing them up and freezing them for later use. Always reheat all foods to 165°F.

A safe food handler is always important when preparing food buns especially important around the holidays. No one wants to give their friends and family any unwanted "gifts" like food poisoning.

Mary Beth Salisbury
Family & Consumer Services Agent
Osceola County Extension Service
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
321-697-3000
msal2@osceola.org
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