Turkey, ham, egg nog, pumpkin pie and many other dishes are all holiday favorites, but they are also the favorite place of bacteria. Food safety is important year round, 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 refrigerators. The following are some important tips and guidelines that should be followed to ensure that no uninvited guest attend your holiday gathering.

Always remember the four basics of food safety: clean, separate, cook and chill. All counter tops, surfaces and utensils should be clean including your hands. Always separate you raw meats from your 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, 41°F - 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 if they will be out for more than two hours and cold foods at 41°F or below? Use chafing dishes and replace food often to keep it hot and you can use beds of ice to keep cold foods cold. When shopping shop for your groceries last and do not leave your food in the car. Also always check the dates of products and prevent raw meat juices from dripping onto other foods. If you are planning on purchasing a frozen turkey you will need to do so 4-5 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 41°F or below.

The following guidelines can be used for determining the size of the turkey you need. When buying a whole bird - 1 pound per person, boneless breast - ½ pound per person and bone-in breast - ¾ pound per person. Your frozen turkey should then be thawed in the refrigerator allowing approximately 24 hours per 5 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 thirty minutes.

When cooking your turkey you can stuff it or leave it un-stuffed. 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 3 - 5 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 3-4 days and gravy within 1-2 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 but is especially important around the
holidays. No one wants to give their friends and family any unwanted gifts like food poisoning. So remember these tips when preparing your holiday meal. If you have any further questions or would like more information on food safety please contact Mary Beth Salisbury, Family & Consumer Sciences Extension, Osceola County Extension, (321) 697-3000.

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