



Food Safety & Nutrition

Happy Holidays Without Foodborne Illness



Sandra Brown

Food Safety and Nutrition Faculty

No matter how good the turkey or ham may taste, or how easy the eggnog may go down, certain food handling methods can easily contribute to bacterial growth that can't be seen, smelled or tasted.

When food is not stored or cooked correctly bacteria multiply rapidly. Food poisoning occurs when bacteria have reached levels in food that the body cannot tolerate. Symptoms may include stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, headaches and fever. Although the symptoms may be unpleasant, in healthy adults they last only a day or two. However, in the elderly, infants, young children and pregnant women are more vulnerable to serious complications of food poisoning.

WSU Extension Clark County and the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline answers consumer questions year round about safe storage and handling of meat, poultry, and other perishable foods.

Some general advice for cooking during the holidays:

- Always use a meat thermometer to measure when the turkey is done. The temperature should be 180 degrees F in the meatiest part of the thigh; 170 degrees F in the breast.
- Juices should be clear, not pink.
- Don't leave the turkey and other food out on the table or on the buffet for more than 2 hours.
- Beef, veal or lamb (roasts, steaks and chops) should be cooked to an internal temperature of 145° F for medium rare and 160° F for medium.
- Store leftovers in small shallow containers and leave airspace around them inside the refrigerator for cool air to circulate.
- Using a food thermometer is a perfect way to monitor the internal temperature of meat and poultry to ensure they are not undercooked. (It makes a great stocking stuffer gift!!)

Safety Not Just For Turkey:

There's an easy way to remember certain perishable holiday foods – always take “eggstra” precautions. Because of potential problems with salmonella bacteria in unbroken eggs, people need to be careful when preparing food made with eggs, especially some desserts like pumpkin or custard pies.

Foods like custards, containing eggs and milk and a high moisture content, need to be cooked to 160 degrees F or until firm. They must also be refrigerated after cooking – a precaution that's not necessary with most cakes, breads or cookies.

As hard as it is not to nibble, a special warning goes to home bakers to avoid eating raw cookie dough. The uncooked eggs in it may harbor harmful bacteria. People with low immunity should be especially mindful not to munch on cookies until they come out of the oven.

When preparing traditional eggnog, cook the eggs (making a custard base for the eggnog), use egg substitute or use pasteurized egg products to ensure safety.

Bacteria can still grow if eggnog is not handled properly. While in a large punchbowl, eggnog should never reach room temperature. Make sure you put ice in the eggnog, or if you prefer not to dilute it, make eggnog "ice cubes" to keep it cool. Or you can set the eggnog serving bowl or pitcher in a bin of ice.

For more information or food safety questions contact WSU Extension at 360-397-6060.
