

# Food Safety Fundamentals For Safe And Festive Holiday Meals

When we think of the holidays, we usually think of family and friends together having fun and lots of good food. We don't want to think about people getting sick.

Unfortunately, many people do get sick at this time of year from the food they eat. Food safety doesn't take a holiday. Following basic recommendations will help ensure safe food and prevent foodborne illness for diners--not only during the holidays, but year-round.

**1. CLEAN: Wash hands and surfaces often.** Keep everything clean while preparing holiday meals. Wash hands and kitchen surfaces often with soap and water. Wash cutting boards, dishes, and utensils after preparing each food item and before going on to the next item. Paper towels are recommended for cleaning up kitchen surfaces.

**2. SEPARATE: Don't cross-contaminate.** "That's when bacteria can spread from one food to another," Conley explains. "This is especially true when handling meats and ready-to-eat foods that don't need further preparation." Separate raw meat, poultry, and seafood from other foods when shopping at the grocery store and in your refrigerator. Use one cutting board for raw meat and poultry and a separate one for other food. Never place cooked food on a plate that previously held raw meat and poultry unless the plate has been thoroughly cleaned.

**3. COOK: Cook to proper temperatures.** Use a food thermometer to make sure meat and poultry are cooked to proper temperatures. Do not second-guess the internal temperature of cooked foods. Cook roasts and steaks to at least 145 °F, whole poultry to 180 °F in the thigh, and ground beef to 160 °F. When reheating, leftovers should be thoroughly heated to 165 °F; sauces, soup, and gravy should be brought to a rolling boil. Eggs are safe to use in food such as homemade eggnog or Caesar salad as long as egg mixtures are cooked to 160 °F. Use a food thermometer to make sure the mixture has reached the proper temperature.

**4. CHILL: Refrigerate promptly.** Conley reminds consumers to refrigerate or freeze leftovers within 2 hours. Place leftovers into shallow containers for rapid cooling. The refrigerator should be maintained at 40 °F or below and the freezer at 0 °F or below. Use an appliance thermometer to check the temperature. Keep hot foods hot, 140 °F or above, and cold foods cold, 40 °F or below. This is especially true for holiday buffets. Use chafing dishes, crock pots, and warming trays to keep foods hot. Keep cold foods cold by nesting the serving dishes in bowls of ice. Never defrost food at room temperature. Thaw food in the refrigerator, in a cold water bath, or in the microwave. Marinate foods in the refrigerator. Conley offers more important steps you can take for a safe holiday meal:

**COOKING FOR GROUPS.** Holiday festivities often require preparing meals for larger groups of people. People who are otherwise great cooks for their families don't necessarily know how to safely prepare, store, and handle large quantities of food for large gatherings. FSIS recently published *Cooking for Groups: A Volunteer's Guide to Food Safety*. It provides recommendations for safely preparing, transporting, and serving food at a large gathering. The *Guide* can be printed from the *Cooking for Groups* Web page at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/cfg/cfg.htm>.

**TRAVELING WITH PERISHABLE FOODS.** To transport cold food, wrap it and then place in an ice chest that contains ice cubes or freezer packs. If you are transporting hot food, keep them hot by wrapping them first in clean kitchen towels and then with newspapers packed in a corrugated box or insulated cooler. Serve or reheat within 2 hours.

**FOODS IN THE MAIL.** When sending cold or frozen food in the mail, use an insulated cooler or heavy corrugated box packed with a frozen gel-pack or dry ice. Label the package "Perishable--Keep Refrigerated" on the outside of the box. Ship the package by overnight delivery and alert the recipient to arrange for a mutually-agreeable delivery date. Perishable mail order food should arrive still frozen or cold-to-the-touch--if not, don't consume the food. Don't even taste it. Always check the label on the item for storage instructions. If the food is to be kept cold, refrigerate or freeze it immediately.

**HANDLING PRECOOKED DINNERS AND LEFTOVERS.** Some cooks forego cooking holiday foods at home altogether and choose to purchase precooked dinners. There are also basic safety measures for the safe handling of these holiday meals. If the dinners are to be picked up hot, keep the food hot. Keeping food warm is not enough. Harmful bacteria multiply fastest in the "danger zone"--the temperatures between 40 and 140 °F. Set the oven temperature high enough to keep the internal temperature of meat and side dishes at 140 °F or above.

Eat the food within 2 hours of pickup. When picking up cold dinners, refrigerate them as soon as possible, always within 2 hours. Serve the meal within 1 to 2 days.

*Have a Happy and Safe Holiday!*

**For additional food safety information about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline's toll-free number 1-800-535-4555. For other questions regarding food safety during the holidays call your local County Extension Office or contact Angela Treadaway Regional Extension Agent with expertise in Food Safety at 205-410-3696.**