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News Release

## **Food Safety Facts for the Holidays**

### **What is foodborne illness?**

Food contaminated by bacteria, viruses and parasites can make you sick. Many people have had foodborne illness and not even known it. It's sometimes called food poisoning, and it can feel like the flu. Symptoms may include the following: stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever. Symptoms can start soon after eating contaminated food, but they can hit up to a month or more later. For some people, especially young children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems, foodborne illness can be very dangerous. No one wants to spend the holidays in the Hospital or for that matter feeling miserable. The Centers of Disease Control estimates that there are as many as 13 million cases of foodborne illness in the US every year. Most cases of foodborne illness can be prevented by using safe food handling practices and using a food thermometer to check that your food is cooked to a safe internal temperature!

**It's always important to keep foods out of the danger zone, which is between 4°C (40°F) and 60°C (140°F) to prevent the growth of harmful bacteria. To do this, just keep hot foods hot, at least 135°F and keep cold foods 40°F or lower.**

### **Preparing and serving holiday buffets**

Do not let foods linger during preparation, cook them thoroughly and serve them promptly. Keep hot foods hot with warming trays, chafing dishes or crock pots. Keep cold foods cold by placing serving dishes on crushed ice.

Remember the "**2-hour rule**" especially when entertaining with a large meal or buffet. Don't let perishable foods linger for longer than two hours in the danger zone.

Keep replacement dishes of food hot in the oven or in a pot or cold in the refrigerator or a cooler during the buffet.

Do not add new food to a serving dish that has been sitting at room temperature for more than two hours. Remember to change serving utensils as well.

Provide serving spoons and tongs for every dish served. Even finger foods, such as cut vegetables, candies, chips/nachos and nuts, should have serving implements to prevent contamination between guests.

### **Traveling with food**

Wrap hot food in foil and heavy towels, or carry in insulated containers to maintain a temperature of at least 60°C (140°F).

Be sure to store cold foods in a cooler with ice/freezer packs to maintain the temperature at 40°F or below. Full coolers keep their temperature better than partially full ones, so add extra insulation to take up unoccupied space. This will also prevent containers from sliding, falling over and leaking.

### **Vegetables, herbs and other foods stored in oil**

Home-prepared products in oil can be made safely only by adding *dehydrated* ingredients to oil. These products can be kept at room temperature. Dehydrated ingredients include ingredients that are very dry and can be kept at room temperature without spoiling, like dried herbs and spices, dry-packed sundried tomatoes, etc.

If home-prepared products in oil are made using *fresh* or *frozen* ingredients, like fresh basil, peppers, mushrooms or garlic, they should be kept refrigerated at all times and must be discarded after one week unless properly acidified. These products may be safely frozen for longer storage. Thaw frozen products in the refrigerator. After the products have thawed, they should be kept refrigerated at all times and must be discarded after one week unless refrozen.

Consumers who purchase products made with *fresh* ingredients from fairs or farmer's markets or receive them as gifts should check that they were constantly refrigerated after they were prepared, and when they were prepared. Discard them if they are more than one week old.

Commercially-prepared products in oil that contain an acid (such as vinegar) or salt in their list of ingredients are generally considered to be safe. Store them in the refrigerator after opening and between each use. Contact the manufacturer if you have questions about a particular product.

### **Eggnog and other recipes with raw or lightly cooked eggs**

Be sure to handle and prepare these tasty treats safely. Commercial, ready-made eggnog is prepared using pasteurized eggs and does not require heating. Homemade eggnog may contain harmful bacteria if not prepared properly. Prepare homemade eggnog using pasteurized egg products, found in most grocery stores.

If you choose to make eggnog with whole eggs, be sure to heat the egg-milk mixture to at least 165°F. Refrigerate promptly, once steaming stops, dividing large amounts into shallow containers so that it cools quickly.

Precautions should also be taken with sauces, mousses, and any other recipes calling for raw or lightly-cooked eggs. Use pasteurized egg products, or bring egg-mixtures to a uniform temperature of 165°F. All of these foods must be stored in the refrigerator.

### **Cider**

Popular holiday beverages, such as unpasteurized apple cider and other drinks made from unpasteurized apple cider may pose a safety risk since they may contain harmful bacteria.

Serve pasteurized ciders or bring unpasteurized cider to a rolling boil before serving. This is especially important when serving cider to children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems.

### **Leftovers: Storage and Reheating**

While it is tempting to leave turkey and other foods at room temperature for snacking after a meal, you should refrigerate all leftovers promptly in uncovered, shallow containers so they cool quickly. Refrigerate once steaming stops and leave the lid or wrap loosely until the food is cooled to refrigeration temperature. Avoid overstocking the refrigerator to allow cool air to circulate freely.

Store turkey meat separately from stuffing and gravy.

Reheat solid leftovers to at least 165°F. Bring gravy to a full, rolling boil and stir during the process.

Use leftover turkey meat, bones, stuffing, gravy and other cooked dishes within four days for best quality or freeze for later use.

For more information on this topic or other food safety related questions please contact Regional Extension Agent Angela Treadaway at the St. Clair County Extension office at 205-338-9416.