

Practice Food Safety and Enjoy the Holiday

The holidays are fast approaching, and what a wonderful opportunity these times are to protect ourselves from food-borne illness! Whether you're talking about special holiday feasts or day-to-day meal preparation, the same rules apply: Clean, Separate, Cook and Chill. Let me show you how these rules apply especially to Thanksgiving food items.

Clean:

It's so important to wash hands, all surfaces and utensils to avoid spreading bacteria when preparing food. Of course many of us know we should wash our hands when starting to prepare food. But it's just as important to wash your hands when switching among various food items, like from raw turkey to raw vegetables for your relish tray. When in doubt, wash your hands.

Separate

Always ensure that you use different cutting boards and/or food preparation areas of your kitchen for raw meat, seafood and vegetables or food you might serve without cooking. This is especially true when dealing with raw turkey, of course, because poultry often come into the home containing dangerous bacteria such as salmonella. So it's especially important, for example, that you store your turkey and other poultry in a deep pan or other container in the refrigerator to keep it from dripping juices onto other foods.

Cook:

Remember, you can't tell if meat is cooked by how it looks, and that old saying that it's cooked if juices run clear is a myth. The only accurate way to tell if meat is cooked enough to kill any germs is to use a meat thermometer, commonly available at grocery stores. When cooking turkey, every part of the turkey should reach a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees F.

This internal temperature issue is why the whole question of whether or not to stuff your turkey comes up. When you stuff, it's harder for the turkey meat and the stuffing to cook properly. So food safety experts suggest cooking stuffing outside the bird or make sure that the stuffing itself reaches 165 degrees F.

Chill:

Be sure to refrigerate turkey, dressing and gravy as soon as practical after serving at or below 41 degrees, certainly within two hours. Turkey and the fixings can be frozen safely. Gravy is the most perishable if frozen, so use within a month. Turkey can stay frozen for up to four months. It's best to store these items in multiple smaller containers, rather than one large container, to improve the rate of cooling. Pumpkin pies and other custard or cream pies also must be kept cold, at or below 41 degrees, to prevent the growth of bacteria. And finally, make sure that leftovers are cooled to 41 degrees or colder as soon as possible after serving, certainly within two hours. Then when you serve leftovers, be sure to reheat foods to at least 165 degrees F as measured with a food thermometer. Don't keep turkey more than four days, and use gravy within two days. Remember: when in doubt, throw it out.

Best wishes for the Holiday from your Health Department, and if you would like more information about holiday food safety or other topics, be sure to visit our website, www.elpasocountyhealth.org.

How to thaw a frozen turkey

Thawing a turkey completely before cooking is important and necessary to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. The safest way to thaw a turkey is in the refrigerator—allow 24 hours of thawing time for each 4 to 5 pounds. Obviously, you need to plan ahead to thaw your turkey in the refrigerator. Another option is to thaw the turkey in cold water, sealed in a leak-proof plastic bag, for about 30 minutes per pound. The water must be changed every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. When in doubt, buy a fresh turkey and be sure to keep it refrigerated at 41 degrees or colder.

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