

Food Safety Tips for Healthy Holidays

Parties, family dinners, and other gatherings where food is served are all part of the holiday cheer. But the merriment can change to misery if food makes you or others ill.

Typical symptoms of foodborne illness are stomach pain, vomiting, and diarrhea, which often start a few days after consuming contaminated food or drink. The symptoms usually are not long-lasting in healthy people—a few hours or a few days—and go away without treatment. But foodborne illness can be severe and even life-threatening to those most at risk:

- older adults
- infants and young children
- pregnant women
- people with HIV/AIDS, cancer, or any condition that weakens their immune systems

Combating bacteria, viruses, parasites, and other contaminants in our food supply is a high priority for FDA. But consumers have a part to play, too, especially when it comes to food handling in the home.

“The good news is that practicing four basic food safety measures can help prevent foodborne illness,” says Marjorie Davidson, consumer educator at FDA.



Photo Illustration: FDA/Michael Ermarth

1. CLEAN:

The first rule of safe food preparation in the home is to keep everything clean.

- Wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling food. “For children, this means the time it

takes to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ twice,” says Davidson.

- Wash food-contact surfaces (cutting boards, dishes, utensils, countertops) after preparing each food item and before going on to the next item.
- Rinse fruits and vegetables

If a turkey is not properly thawed, the outside of the turkey will be done before the inside, and the inside will not be hot enough to destroy disease-causing bacteria.

thoroughly under running water and use a produce brush to remove surface dirt.

- Do not rinse raw meat and poultry before cooking. "Washing these foods makes it more likely for bacteria to spread to areas around the sink and countertops," says Davidson.

2. SEPARATE:

Don't give bacteria the opportunity to spread from one food to another (cross-contaminate).

- Keep raw meat, poultry, and seafood and their juices away from foods that won't be cooked while shopping in the store, and while preparing and storing at home.
- Consider using one cutting board only for foods that will be cooked (raw meat, poultry, and seafood) and another one only for ready-to-eat foods (such as raw fruits and vegetables).
- Do not put cooked meat on an unwashed plate that has held raw meat.

3. COOK:

Food is safely cooked when it reaches a high enough internal temperature to kill harmful bacteria.

- "Color is not a reliable indicator of doneness," says Davidson. Use a food thermometer to make sure meat, poultry, and fish are cooked to a safe internal temperature. To check a turkey for doneness, insert a food thermometer into

the inner thigh area near the breast of the turkey but not touching bone. The turkey is done when the temperature reaches

180°F. If the turkey is stuffed, the temperature of the stuffing should be 165°F. Make sure oysters in oyster dressing are thoroughly cooked.

- Bring sauces, soups, and gravies to a rolling boil when reheating.
- Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm. When making your own eggnog or other recipe calling for raw eggs, use pasteurized shell eggs, liquid or frozen pasteurized egg products, or powdered egg whites.
- Don't eat uncooked cookie dough, which may contain raw eggs.


4. CHILL:

Refrigerate foods quickly because harmful bacteria grow rapidly at room temperature.

- Refrigerate leftovers and takeout foods within two hours.
- Set your refrigerator no higher than 40°F and the freezer at 0°F. Check both periodically with an appliance thermometer.
- Never defrost food at room temperature. Food can be defrosted safely in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or in the microwave. Food thawed in cold water or in the microwave should be cooked immediately.



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- Allow the correct amount of time to properly thaw food. For example, a 20-pound turkey needs two to three days to thaw completely when thawed in the refrigerator. If a turkey is not properly thawed, the outside of the turkey will be done before the inside, and the inside will not be hot enough to destroy disease-causing bacteria.
- Don't taste food that looks or smells questionable. Davidson says, "A good rule to follow is, when in doubt, throw it out." 

For More Information

www.foodsafety.gov

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FDA Food Information Line

1-888-SAFEFOOD

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USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline

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