

*Oregon Department of Agriculture offers food safety advice for the holiday season*

## How to have a safe holiday meal

**November 15, 2006...** The holiday season is just around the corner. That means get-togethers with friends, family, and food. Lots of food. The Oregon Department of Agriculture is reminding you to practice good, safe food handling and preparation techniques at all times, but with perhaps a little extra attention to detail for the Thanksgiving or Christmas holiday meal.

“There is always potential for food illness with the bigger meals that are prepared, so food safety is a very important thing to remember during this time of the year,” says Ellen Laymon, field supervisor with ODA's Food Safety Division.

A safe meal can be ensured through proper food handling, preparation, and storage. Slacking off in any of the three areas could spell trouble.

Holiday food safety actually begins as you do your grocery shopping. Cross-contamination of foods can take place right in the grocery cart. Make sure food that might be consumed in a ready-to-eat fashion, such as apples, are kept in a bag. The grocery store provides bags for that reason. They also provide bags for meats to make sure there are no drips that might contaminate other foods.

Once the food purchase is made, head straight for home. It's always a good idea to make the grocery store the last stop on your list of errands for the day so those foods are still cold and safe when you get them home to your refrigerator. Put groceries away immediately. Don't leave foods on the counter while you try to get other things done.

The traditional turkey is a centerpiece for the holiday meal. It also deserves close attention when it comes to food safety. Remember that the turkey thaws from outside in. So the surface temperature is going to be warmer a lot longer which raises the potential for growth of food pathogens.

“People have a tendency to thaw their turkeys out on the counter or the stove top and we know that is not a safe thing to do,” says Laymon. “Thawing overnight in a refrigerator is probably the best practice. The general rule of thumb is one night of refrigerator thawing for every five pounds of turkey. So you need to plan ahead when you have a bigger-sized bird.”

Contrary to what many people think, a turkey should not be washed or rinsed off as you begin to prepare it. That only smears or transfers the bacteria onto your hands or into your sink where, if not immediately sanitized, it could easily get onto other foods or utensils. Immediately throw away any packaging from the turkey and wipe up any drips with a disposable item, like a paper towel.

It's the cooking of the turkey that will kill the bacteria.

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ODA recommends the use of a meat thermometer to make sure you get a good endpoint temperature. That temperature should reach 165 degrees Fahrenheit. It's also recommended to not put stuffing in the bird. It's much safer to prepare the stuffing in a baking dish and bake it separately simply because you don't easily know what the internal temperature of the turkey is going to be.

It is also unwise to partially cook the turkey the night before, cool it in the refrigerator, and then finish the cooking the next day. Frequent heating and cooling does a good job of promoting bacterial growth.

Chances are turkey is not the only food item being prepared in the kitchen right before the dinner. Other foods— many ready-to-eat items— are being prepared right alongside the big bird. That sets up the potential of cross-contamination.

“Make sure you have separate cutting boards, separate knives and other utensils when you are handling raw versus ready-to-eat foods,” says Laymon.

Of course, handwashing is an absolute requirement prior, during, and after food handling.

Finally, the dinner is cooked. The guests are served. Everything is delicious and very filling. Dinner is over and it is very tempting to just get up from the table and retire to the living room for conversation. Don't forget about the leftovers.

“Always have all leftovers put away within two hours,” warns Laymon. “Put things in shallow containers so they will cool rapidly in the refrigerator. Keep them covered. Keep them separate. That way the food will cool rapidly and will be safe.”

Leftovers may be the best part of holiday dinners. Reheated leftovers need to reach at least 165 degrees.

“In general, the rule of thumb on leftovers is only reheat them once,” says Laymon. “So plan that if you are not going to be preparing the leftover turkey within two or three days, you'll want to freeze what you won't be using.”

Leftovers also make good carry-out items. If you take food home from someone else's dinner table and you live more than a half hour away, make sure you have some means of refrigerating the food in your car. A cooler with ice should do the trick.

Looking ahead to the season of holiday parties and potlucks, there is additional food for thought when it comes to food for consumption.

“Think about the facilities at the office or wherever the party is,” says Laymon. “How long will the food you are bringing be in transportation? If you don't have the facilities for refrigeration to keep cold foods cold or something like a crockpot to keep hot foods hot, then you better just think about bringing the chips.”

It all boils down to practicing good food handling, preparation, and storage techniques— not just during the holidays, but all year long to ensure a safe and satisfying meal for family and friends.

For more information, contact Ellen Laymon at (503) 986-4725.