



Central Office: 505 Silas Deane Highway, Wethersfield, CT 06109 Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin: 240 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT 06037 Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248

Newington: 131 Cedar Street, Newington, CT 06111 Phone (860) 665-8586 Fax (860) 665-8533

Rocky Hill: 761 Old Main Street, Rocky Hill, CT 06067 Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax (860) 258-2767

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## Health District Offers Safe Food Handling Tips for Holiday Meals

Did you know that every year, approximately 48 million people suffer from food-borne illness during the holiday season? According to the Connecticut Department of Public Health, holiday buffets, party trays or even a poorly stored turkey can be the culprit of disease. While food is an important part of families and friends coming together, the Central Connecticut Health District is urging you to keep your loved ones safe through safe food handling practices.

Preventing food-borne illness can be as simple as following four basic steps: clean, separate, cook, and chill. The first step refers to hygiene; cleanliness is extremely important in preventing food-borne illness. All surfaces, cutting boards, utensils, and dishes should be washed often with hot, soapy water. Personal cleanliness is also a must for food safety. Hands should be washed for at least 20 seconds in hot, soapy water before, during, and after food preparation. This is especially important after preparing meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood, and after using the bathroom or changing diapers, and after handling pets.

The second step in preparing a safe holiday meal is to separate foods and utensils. Different clean plates, pans, boards, and utensils should be used for raw and cooked meats. It is preferable to use separate cutting boards and utensils for produce and meat, poultry, and seafood products. Cooked foods should never be placed on an unwashed plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood. Bacteria, parasites, and other germs can contaminate hands, cutting boards, plates, and utensils, and can be transferred easily to any surface that is touched.

Of course, adequate cooking is necessary to avoid food poisoning. Many families serve a traditional turkey or poultry meal, while many families opt for less traditional meats, such as ham, pork, beef, and wild game. Roasting is the recommended method for cooking most meats. To keep them tender and moist, slow roasting on a rack in a shallow pan at a moderate temperature of 325<sup>o</sup>F. is preferred, but the USDA does not recommend cooking at a lower temperature. When foods are cooked at lower temperatures, they may not get warm enough to get out of the danger zone (between 40<sup>o</sup> and 140<sup>o</sup>F.), so bacteria may multiply rapidly and are not killed. Use a food thermometer to be sure the meat is sufficiently cooked; generally, lean beef should be cooked to an internal temperature of 145<sup>o</sup>F., pork to between 160<sup>o</sup> and 170<sup>o</sup>F., fully cooked ham reheated to 140<sup>o</sup>F. while uncooked hams need to reach 160<sup>o</sup>F. to kill bacteria. Turkey and poultry need to be cooked to an internal temperature of 180<sup>o</sup>F. Always keep in mind that boned and rolled meats require more cooking time per pound than bone-in meats, since it takes longer for the heat to penetrate through solid meat.

If the meat is frozen, remember to thaw it in the refrigerator or submerge it in a deep sink of cold water (still in its original wrapper), changing the water every 30 minutes to keep it cold. This will keep the meat out of the danger zone. Whether preparing or serving food, an important rule to follow is **KEEP HOT FOODS HOT (over 140<sup>o</sup>F) AND COLD FOODS COLD (below 40<sup>o</sup>F)**. If the meal will be served buffet style, use chafing dishes, slow cookers, and warming trays to keep food warm, and place cold foods in serving pieces that are surrounded by ice. Also, pay attention to the time; foods should not sit at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Throw out any food that remains at room temperature for longer periods of time.

Once the meal has been safely prepared and served, observing the rules for cleanliness, separation, and cooking, the final step in ensuring food safety is to chill. During the food preparation process, fresh produce needs to be refrigerated within 2 hours of peeling or cutting. When the meal is over, be sure to wrap and store the left-over food in the refrigerator right away. Divide cooked foods into shallow containers to store in order to encourage rapid, even cooling. When it's time to eat those leftovers, keep in mind that stuffing and gravy can be refrigerated safely for 2

days and cooked turkey and vegetables can be stored in the refrigerator for 4 days (or frozen for storage up to 4 to 6 months). Always remember to reheat meat to 165<sup>0</sup>F. If food is not refrigerated within the safe time limits, it should be discarded. **WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!**

By employing safe food handling practices, families and friends can enjoy the holidays together without being concerned about food-borne illness. The Central Connecticut Health District wishes everyone a safe and healthy holiday. Bon appetit!