

Food Safety Pitfalls at Thanksgiving & Beyond

Avoid common pitfalls that can turn a festive Thanksgiving meal into a foodborne illness disaster! Preparing and cooking a turkey safely can determine whether your family and friends simply enjoy a delicious meal, or if they will end up with an unpleasant foodborne illness. How you handle the food leftover from the big meal will also affect the health of those who will be finishing up the feast in the days ahead.

For step-by-step instructions on how to safely prepare a turkey dinner, see [HGIC 3560 *How to Cook Turkey*](#). To find out how to avoid common food safety pitfalls when preparing the Thanksgiving dinner, read on!

#1 Pitfall is Dirty Hands

Did you know that unwashed hands cause most foodborne illnesses? There is a simple solution to this common pitfall—wash your hands!

- Always wash your hands in hot, soapy water before preparing food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers and handling pets.
- Wash your hands again after touching raw meat, poultry or seafood and before handling ready-to-eat foods.
- Use warm water to get your hands wet, add soap and rub hands together for 20 seconds before rinsing carefully.

#2 Pitfall is Cross-Contamination

Campylobacter jejuni are bacteria common in poultry that are easily killed by heat. Most people do not undercook poultry, so the likely way that *C. jejuni* cause illness is when kitchen equipment is used to prepare raw poultry and then not properly washed before preparing ready-to-eat foods.

- Wash cutting boards, knives, utensils and counter tops in hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before going on to the next one.
- Use one cutting board for raw meat, poultry or seafood and a different cutting board for ready-to-eat foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Sanitize cutting boards and other surfaces that have been in contact with raw meat, poultry or seafood. To sanitize, immerse the item in a solution of 1 tablespoon liquid, unscented, chlorine bleach per gallon of warm, not hot, water and leave for several minutes. Plastic cutting boards can also be sanitized in a dishwasher using the wash and dry cycle.
- Sanitize a non-metal kitchen sponge by heating it while still wet in a microwave oven for one minute. Avoid burns by allowing the sponge to cool before using it. Or rinse and squeeze out sponge and put through the wash and dry cycle of a dishwasher.
- Use paper towels to clean up raw meat and poultry spills on kitchen counters and other surfaces, and to dry your hands. If you use cloth towels, do not reuse them if they have been in contact with raw meat or poultry juices until you wash them in the hot cycle of the washing machine and dry in the dryer.

#3 Pitfall is Guessing the Turkey is Done

Bacteria can survive on foods that are not cooked properly. The color of meat and poultry does not show if it is safely cooked. Use a food thermometer to measure the internal temperature of cooked foods and cook all poultry to at least 165 °F.

- Make sure that the turkey is completely thawed before cooking. Allow 24 hours for every 4 to 5 pounds of turkey thawed in the refrigerator. A 20-pound turkey will take between 4 and 5 days to completely thaw in the refrigerator.
- Cooking overnight at a low setting (200 to 250 °F) is unsafe. Bacteria can easily grow under these conditions. Roast a turkey in a preheated oven set at 325 °F.

#4 Pitfall is Mishandling Leftovers

Promptly store leftovers to keep them out of temperatures where bacteria thrive.

- Setting the temperature of your refrigerator between 34 and 36 °F when you know you will be adding a lot of leftovers will help keep food at proper temperatures. Always keep a thermometer in the refrigerator. Make sure that the temperature in your refrigerator is no higher than 40 °F.
- Within 2 hours after cooking, remove the stuffing from the turkey and carve the meat off the bones. Put leftovers in a shallow container, no more than 2 inches deep, to allow quick cooling. Never put a big pot of hot food in the refrigerator—it will take too long to cool down to safe temperatures.
- Store in the refrigerator or freezer. It is best to use refrigerated leftovers within 4 days. If you won't be eating your leftovers in that

time, put them in the freezer where they will keep safely.

Have a happy and healthy Thanksgiving!

Sources:

1. Medeiros, Lydia C., Virginia N. Hillers, Patricia A. Kendall and April Mason. *Food Safety Education: What Should We Be Teaching to Consumers?* Society for Nutrition Education 2001.
http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=MIimg&_imagekey=B8JK3-4T3NP09-8-1&_cdi=43743&_user=590719&_pii=S1499404606601747&_origin=search&_coverDate=04%2F30%2F2001&_sk=999669997&view=c&wchp=dGLbVzW-zSkWb&md5=8c4916416d622b9bda5f4ff10328dce5&ie=/sdarticle.pdf
2. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. April 2007. *Keep Food Safe! Food Safety Basics*.
http://www.fsis.usda.gov/fact_Sheets/Keep_Food_Safe_Food_Safety_Basics/index.asp
3. USDA Agricultural Research Service. April 2007. *Best Ways to Clean Kitchen Sponges*.
<http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/pr/2007/070423.htm>

Prepared by Pamela Schmutz, HGIC Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University, 10/10.

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.