



'Tis the season—holidays bring togetherness and a sense of generosity and good will. Holiday dinners and office parties with pot-luck lunches are frequent during this time of year. If good food safety practices are not followed, the best intentioned pot-luck lunch or dinner can result in a foodborne illness. Whether preparing one dish for a pot-luck or an entire meal for family and friends, here are some simple food safety principles that are important to remember.

First, wash hands and food preparation surfaces often. Handwashing is one of the easiest methods to prevent any illness—not just a foodborne illness. It is especially important to wash hands after preparing any raw meat. To properly wash hands, use soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. Do not use the same utensils or surfaces for preparing produce items after preparing meats unless utensils and surfaces are properly cleaned. To wash surfaces such as cutting boards or counter tops, use a warm water and soap solution, rinse with clean warm water, and allow the surface to air dry. Handwashing and clean surfaces are especially important if you are preparing a salad or other food item that will not be cooked prior to being eaten.

Second, cook foods thoroughly. Many foodborne illnesses can be prevented by making sure that the food items, especially meats, are cooked completely. Beef, fish, and pork should be cooked to at least 145°F, but ground meats, such as hamburger, need to be cooked to at least 155°F. Poultry, including chicken and turkey, should be cooked to a minimum of 165°F. The color of the meat is not a reliable method for determining if it is fully cooked. The most accurate way to check the cooking temperature is with a thermometer. A food thermometer can be purchased at many retail department stores for under \$10. Look for a small dimple near the tip of the thermometer—this is where the temperature is registered. Some thermometers will have a dimple near the tip while others will have a dimple two inches or more up the stem of the thermometer. If your thermometer does not have a dimple on the stem, then it registers the temperature right at the tip.

Third, if foods are prepared in advance, make sure they are cooled rapidly. Foods should be cooled to 41°F or less within four hours. For thicker foods, such as a chili, cooling will take a longer time. When preparing thicker food, divide it among smaller containers to allow rapid cooling. Let the cooling food have contact with the cold air of the refrigerator. Tightly covering the food traps heat in and does not allow for rapid cooling. Occasionally stirring the food while it is cooling will also help to lower the temperature quickly. If the food item is going to be served hot, it is important to completely reheat the food to at least 165°F prior to serving it. Check the temperature of the reheated food with a thermometer.

Finally, when setting up and serving food, make sure that hot foods stay hot and cold foods stay cold. Once a food has been reheated, it can safely be maintained at a temperature of 135° if it is to be served hot. Cold foods should be kept at a temperature

of 41°F or lower. If temperature control is not available, foods should not be kept at “room temperature” for more than four hours. This is especially important for items such as sandwiches that contain meats.

Some holiday favorites, such as cookie dough, homemade eggnog, and some types of stuffing, may contain eggs that are raw or undercooked. Eggs sometimes contain *Salmonella enteritidis*, which can cause illness if eggs are not handled and cooked properly. To avoid egg-related illness from holiday foods, do not eat unbaked cookie dough; cook baked egg-containing dishes to 160°F, and make recipes that call for raw or undercooked eggs, like eggnog, with eggs that have been treated to destroy *Salmonella* or with pasteurized egg products.

Nobody wants to remember a pot-luck meal because of consuming a contaminated food or beverage. These food safety tips will help you to celebrate the holidays without the added stress of a foodborne illness. For more information, please contact the Idaho Food Protection Program at (208) 334-5936.