

Don't Spoil the Holidays

– Put Food Safety on the Menu –

(Newark, NJ) The kickoff to the holidays is about to begin with Thanksgiving on deck. Besides spending time with family, the next best thing about the holidays is of course – EATING! Family recipes passed down from generation to generation will take their place on holiday menus. Unfortunately, there are dangers that lurk in the kitchen and home that can spoil the holidays.

Here are a few common questions the NJ Poison Control Center receives on Thanksgiving.

- I cooked the turkey with the plastic on. Is it safe to eat?
- I ate stuffing cooked in the turkey. Will I get sick?
- My dog ate chocolate left on the table. What should I do?
- My 3 year old swallowed two of my mother-in-law's blood pressure pills. What should I do?

Even experienced family chefs can find cooking a holiday feast for a large group of people stressful and even overwhelming. Remember, it's never too early to start planning and preparing. Waiting until the last minute often cause people to take short cuts when it comes to safe food handling practices; putting their guests at risk for leaving the table with more than just full bellies!

Quick facts about food poisoning.

- Food poisoning can happen just a few hours after consuming contaminated food.
- Some symptoms are nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhea, and fever.
- The effects of food poisoning are not always immediate.

Forgetting about food safety is a recipe for disaster," says Diane Calello, MD, NJ Poison Control Center Executive and Medical Director, Rutgers NJ Medical School. "It's important to remember that you should not be preparing food if you are feeling sick or have any type of respiratory illness or infection. This puts your guests at risk of becoming ill."

It's simple to avoid food poisoning. Follow a few tips while preparing your holiday meal:

1. **Shopping**

While food shopping is fun, you should keep in mind a few things:

- Take care to keep poultry, meat, and seafood items separate from produce.
- Make sure everything is in its own bag. You can even double-bag items to be extra safe!
- Keep meat, fish, poultry, and eggs last on your list. If these stay out of the fridge and in your cart for a long time, they can become contaminated.
- Finally, you might be tired after a long shopping trip, but make sure to freeze or refrigerate all meat, poultry, seafood, and dairy products.

2. **Preparation**

Take these precautions while preparing your meal.

- Don't defrost your turkey on the counter. Leave it in the refrigerator for a few days.
- Wash fruits and vegetables well and ensure that they don't touch any surfaces exposed to raw meats.

- Use separate cutting boards, dishes, and utensils for cooked and uncooked foods, and make sure to wash them between uses.
- Don't forget one of the most important things – wash your hands with warm water and soap!

3. **Cooking**

Whether you try difficult recipes or stick to a traditional family dish, it's important you cook food properly.

- Use a food thermometer to determine whether your turkey has been cooked enough.
- Check out www.foodsafety.gov for proper temperatures for turkeys and other foods.

4. **Serving**

Time to eat!

- It may seem like a good idea to make all your holiday food earlier on, but it is not safe to leave cooked foods sitting out on the counter for more than two hours.
- Use a warming tray or chafing dish to keep food warm (140°F or above).¹
- Similarly, don't leave foods that are meant to be cold out on the counter more than two hours.

5. **Storage**

Odds are you will probably end up with leftovers from your holiday meal. It is important to store them properly. Even if foods are cooked, they are still at risk for contamination.

- Keep leftovers in the fridge and make sure your refrigerator is set between 40°F and 32°F.²
- Food in the freezer can be kept longer, but again, set it to the right temperature of 0°F or below.²
- When you reheat foods, make sure they are hot enough.
- If you're using a microwave, check that the food's temperature has reached 165°F or higher.¹

Food poisoning can be serious. If at any time during the preparing/cooking process you are uncertain of something or think a food poisoning situation may have occurred, don't hesitate to get help. Call the NJ Poison Control Center unless the person is unconscious, not breathing, hard to wake up, or seizing then call 9-1-1. Poison control centers are a great resource for information and emergencies. Keep us at your fingertips. Save the Poison Help number (1-800-222-1222) as a contact in your cell phone.

Help is Just a Phone Call Away!