



# Illness-bearing microbes don't take holidays

To ensure that holiday celebrations foster happy memories, take steps to keep a great meal from being followed by the wrong gut-level reaction. Food-borne illnesses caused by improper food handling are a miserable experience at best and at worst, a risk to life.

Here are some food-safety guidelines and simple ways to follow them.

The Food and Drug Administration lists "Four Steps to Food Safety": Keep it Chilled; Keep it Clean; Keep it Separate; Cook it Right. These steps seem rather simple, but somehow during the hectic holidays, safe food handling can be overlooked.

Here are some tips that work for the holidays, or anytime.

**Make two food shopping trips:** One should be for canned and packaged goods and another for perishable refrigerated items. One long trip can take too long, allowing cold foods to warm up too much. If you can only shop once, put refrigerated and frozen foods in your shopping cart last.

**Have a cooler in your car with some ice:** Keep cold food cold until you get home. If you are shopping on the spur of the moment, make due with a thick

cardboard box lined with a plastic bag. Place a bag of ice or frozen vegetables on the top of your cold food. Now perishable foods can make the long drive home and still be safe to eat.

**Keep all food preparation surfaces clean:** This includes your hands. Wash them with soap and water long enough to sing a refrain of "Jingle Bells." Two verses of "Happy Birthday to You" are also long enough to remove unwanted "bugs" and leave hands clean enough for handling food.

**Wear a clean apron or long shirt:** This protects food from dirt and microbes in your "street" clothes. Of course, it protects clothes from food too.

**Keep several towels on hand:** Instead of using just one dish cloth or towel for everything, set aside one for counters, another for cutting boards and one for dishes.

**Keep it clean II:** Remember to wash the outside of fruits and vegetables.

**Prevent cross-contamination:** Have a cutting board and knife clearly labeled for meats, poultry and fish, along with another set for fresh fruits and vegetables. This will keep guests from using

the wrong tools and accidentally cutting the fruit with the knife you just used to cut the meat.

Cross-contamination also can occur in the refrigerator, especially when thawing meats. If meat is stored above a food that will not be cooked, there is a risk of contamination by dripping meat juices.

If the only place to thaw the turkey is in the refrigerator above the produce, use that thick cardboard box lined with a plastic bag or position a large pan to catch drainage.

**Cook it right:** Heat food to a safe temperature in a short period of time -- whether fresh foods or leftovers. A simple way to know that you are doing it right is to check internal meat temperatures with a meat thermometer.

Safe internal temperatures (in degrees Fahrenheit) are: poultry, 180; ground meats, 165; beef, rare, 145; medium, 160; well done, 170; pork and ham, 160; stuffing and leftovers, 165; eggs, cook until yolk and white are firm.

For more information about meats and poultry, call USDA's hot line at (800) 535-4555 or visit the USDA Web site, [www.fsis.usda.gov/thermy](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/thermy).

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Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS  
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,  
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.  
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.

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