Food safety advice will help cooks spread joy, not germs

Good food is a big part of holiday celebrations. But some rather simple food-safety mistakes can turn the best food into great misery. It is easy to get comfortable with sloppy habits that have never been a problem before. But, when conditions that promote "bad" bacteria growth come together, it doesn't take much to make someone extremely sick or even cause death in some cases. For some bacteria, like Salmonella, it only takes a couple dozen viable cells (which can fit on the tip of a pin with room to spare), to cause food poisoning.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which maintains the website Food-Safety.gov, these common mistakes are known to cause serious illness:

» **Mistake No. 1:** Tasting food to see if it's still good.
You can't taste, smell, see or hear bacteria that cause food poisoning. Tasting only a tiny amount can cause serious illness. Dispose of foods before bacteria grow. See the "Safe Storage Times" chart at FoodSafety.gov.

» **No. 2:** Putting cooked meat back on a plate that held raw meat.

Most raw meat, poultry and seafood will have some bacteria on the surface; this gets transferred to plates or cutting boards. Cooking kills germs on the meat, but putting the cooked meat back on a contaminated plate can re-infect the meat.

» **No. 3:** Thawing food on the counter.
As food thaws at room temperature, the outer portion can warm to a temperature that supports rapid bacterial growth well before the middle is thawed. Plan ahead and thaw the food in the refrigerator, or thaw it more rapidly in the microwave. Water-tight packaged frozen food also can be immersed in cold water to thaw. Change the water at least every half hour.

» **No. 4:** Washing meat or poultry.
Washing raw meat or poultry can spread bacteria to your sink, counter tops and other surfaces. If rinsing is necessary, clean contact areas well with soap and water.

» **No. 5:** Letting food cool before putting it in the fridge.
If food is extremely hot, keep it covered and let it cool slightly. However, as the food cools to a warm temperature, bacteria can grow rapidly to dangerous levels within two

hours, even within one hour at 90 degrees Fahrenheit.

» **No. 6:** Eating raw cookie dough or other foods with uncooked eggs. Uncooked eggs can contain Salmonella or other harmful bacteria.

» **No. 7:** Marinating meat or seafood on the counter.
Bacteria multiplies rapidly at room temperature. The marinade may not prevent this, so always marinate meat or seafood in the refrigerator.

» **No. 8:** Using raw meat marinade on cooked food.
To prevent cross-contamination with marinade, reuse it only if you bring it to a boil just before using.

» **No. 9:** Undercooking meat, poultry, seafood or eggs.
To ensure safety, foods need to be cooked to a high enough temperature to kill harmful bacteria. Follow directions for safe cooking temperatures and use a food thermometer.

» **No. 10:** Not washing your hands.
Of course, your mother taught you this. But, be sure to do it the right way. Wash your hands for 20 seconds with soap and running water.

Avoiding these 10 mistakes can help to ensure you're doing your part to keep the holidays happy.

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, 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.