

# FOOD SAFETY FOR HOLIDAY GATHERINGS

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## INTRODUCTION

You've decorated for the holidays and planned your meal, but now it's your turn to host a holiday gathering. It is very important to keep food safe while preparing and serving because many foodborne illnesses can happen during potlucks and gatherings, especially when foods are left at room temperature for too long. Certain people are more at risk for foodborne illness, including young children, pregnant women, older adults and individuals with weakened immune systems. Considering food safety while preparing and serving holiday dishes is crucial for preventing foodborne illness.

## FOUR STEPS FOR FOOD SAFETY

### STEP 1: CLEAN

The first step to safe food preparation is to clean your hands. Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water before handling, preparing or eating food. You should also wash your hands after using the bathroom, sneezing, coughing, blowing your nose, touching your face or hair, handling raw meat, handling money, smoking, cleaning or dealing with garbage.

Even lower-risk foods, like fruits and vegetables, can get contaminated, so wash them before using them to reduce harmful microorganisms. You don't need to use soap or special washes to clean produce. Just rinse them under cool, running water and dry them with a clean towel. Make sure to wash all cutting boards, utensils, serving dishes and countertops with hot water and dish soap and then use a sanitizing spray, especially if they have been in contact with raw poultry, meats, seafood or eggs. These items can spread bacteria that cause foodborne illness.

### STEP 2: SEPARATE

Cross-contamination is a major concern for foodborne illness. This happens when any food item encounters raw or uncooked foods, contaminated equipment or unclean hands. To prevent cross-contamination, wash your hands often, store raw meat and poultry on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator and use separate cutting boards and utensils for high-risk food items like raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs.

### STEP 3: COOK

Cooking food to the right and safe temperatures and keeping food out of the danger zone is another key aspect of food safety. For all food items that are cooked or ready to eat, keep them hot and above 140 F. Avoid pre-cooking and partially grilling items that you plan to finish cooking later.

**Pro Food Safety Tip:** Have separate labeled cutting boards for fruits and raw meats. Another common cross-contamination issue during the holidays is washing poultry in the sink, which the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) do not recommend.



**Should I wash my turkey?** No. This is not recommended because washing raw poultry can contaminate the sink with Salmonella. If you do wash your turkey, you must clean and sanitize the sink area afterward. Start by cleaning the area with soap and hot water, then sanitize it using one tablespoon of unscented liquid chlorine bleach mixed with one gallon of water. Allow the area to air dry.

**Should i stuff my turkey?** No. It's safer to serve dressing or stuffing on the side. The stuffing takes longer to cook fully and may not reach 165 F, which is necessary to eliminate harmful bacteria.

Many people try to judge whether food is fully cooked by looking at it or smelling it. This is not a reliable method for food safety. A meat thermometer is an essential tool in every kitchen to ensure that foods reach a minimum safe internal temperature. Here's a table for minimum internal temperatures for common holiday dishes:

Make sure to check your turkey in three key areas: the thickest part of the breast, where the body and thigh join and where the body and wing join. This ensures that all parts of the meat are cooked properly. Many families love using slow cookers to prepare holiday meals, which can be effective if you keep the food out of the danger zone while cooking, or at least above 140 degrees. Check the manufacturer's instructions for proper use and capacity.

Frying poultry is another popular holiday dish, but it can be dangerous if not done correctly. Always ensure the food reaches the minimum internal temperature. The USDA recommends having a fire extinguisher nearby and being ready with a metal lid for the fryer in case of a grease fire. A turkey typically takes three to five minutes per pound to fry at an oil temperature of 375 F.

Food Item	Preparation/Type	
Beef, veal, lamb, pork	Steaks, roasts, chops	145 with 3 minutes of rest time
	Ground meat and sausage	160
Chicken, turkey, and other poultry	All types, including ground, whole bird, giblets, sausage	165
Ham	Raw ham	145 with 3 minutes of rest time
	Precooked ham (ready-to-eat)	165
Casseroles	Mixed dishes with meat or meatless	165

#### STEP 4: CHILL

Just as it's important to keep hot foods hot, you must also keep cold foods cold, at or below 40 F. Cold temperatures help stop bacteria from growing on food, so make sure foods are stored properly. Perishable foods like casseroles, mixed dishes with dairy and cooked proteins should not be left at room temperature for more than two hours. To serve large groups safely, keep cold foods cold (under 40 F) and hot foods hot (above 140 F). A good way to manage this is to only put out small amounts of food for serving while keeping the rest in a warm oven or refrigerator, refilling dishes as needed.

If you have leftovers from the holiday meal, store them properly. If they were left at room temperature too long, it's safest to throw them away. If you want to keep leftovers, place them in shallow containers and refrigerate or freeze them for faster cooling.

When hosting a holiday gathering, it is crucial to ensure food safety to prevent foodborne illnesses, particularly for at-risk groups like young children, pregnant women, older adults and those with weakened immune systems. Follow four essential steps: clean hands and surfaces, separate raw and cooked foods to avoid cross-contamination, cook foods to the proper temperatures using a meat thermometer and chill perishable foods at or below 40 F. By taking these precautions, you can enjoy a safe and festive holiday meal.

*If you have additional questions about cooking a turkey, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854), 10:00 am to 4:00 pm Eastern Time, Monday through Friday; 10:00 am to 2:00 pm Eastern Time on Thanksgiving Day. Operators are available in English and Spanish.*

## REFERENCES

Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2013). Deep Fat Frying and Food Safety. U.S. Department of Agriculture. [fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/deep-fat-frying](https://fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/deep-fat-frying)

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