

Department of Health and Senior Services

P.O. Box 360
Trenton , NJ 08625

CONTACT: Office of Communications
(609) 984-7160

News Releases

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Don't Let Food-Related Illness Spoil the Holidays

With the holiday season quickly approaching, the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services reminds residents that simple preventive measures can keep families and guests safe from food-related illness.

Cooking, serving and storing food at safe temperatures and using pasteurized products are important ways to avoid illness from bacteria such as e. coli or Salmonella, two of the more common but serious food-related illnesses.

Annually, 76 million Americans get sick, 300,000 are hospitalized and 5,000 people die from food-related illness, according the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“Holidays should be a time for celebration, not for going to the emergency room,” said Health and Senior Services Commissioner Poonam Alaigh, M.D. “By following proper guidelines on preparing and serving food, you can ensure that holiday meals are cooked at the proper temperature and leftovers are thoroughly reheated.”

To offer additional guidance, Dr. Alaigh pointed to the Department's Food and Drug Safety Program which offers “Holiday Food Safety Tips,” a fact sheet packed with information for consumers about food temperatures, what to do with leftovers and much more. The fact sheet is available on the Program's website at:

<http://nj.gov/health/foodanddrugsafety/consumer.shtml> There is also a number to call with any questions at (609)826-4935.

For example, when cooking turkey, everyone should use a food thermometer to make sure the meat is cooked properly. Food thermometers usually cost less than \$10 and are widely available at supermarkets and convenience stores. The temperature of the thickest part of the breast or thigh should be at least 165° F (74 C).

Stuffing should also be cooked separately in its own oven dish or on the stove top to avoid cross-contamination. If you choose to stuff your turkey, make sure that the stuffing is packed loosely just prior to roasting. Then remove all stuffing immediately after cooking.

There are three ways to defrost turkey - in the refrigerator, in cold water, or in the microwave. Never defrost turkey at room temperature. If you decide to thaw the turkey in the refrigerator, place it in a large cooking dish on the bottom shelf to prevent raw juices from dripping onto other foods. Turkey in a leak-proof package may be defrosted in cold water. Submerge whole bird or cut-up parts in cold water, changing the water every 30 minutes. If using the microwave, cook turkey immediately after thawing because some areas

of the food may become warm and begin to cook during microwaving.

Besides cooking turkey properly, the DHSS offers the following tips to avoid food-related illness:

- When making cookies, cakes or other baked goods, always make sure baked goods are cooked thoroughly and never eat raw cookie dough or batter made from raw eggs.
- Eggnog that you purchase at the store is pasteurized to remove any dangerous bacteria. However, when making homemade eggnog, always use pasteurized egg and milk ingredients.
- Unpasteurized juice and cider can contain dangerous bacteria like *E.coli* or *Salmonella* that cause serious illness (especially in children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems). Check labels to ensure that you are buying only pasteurized fruit juices and cider during the holidays, and year- round.
- Because raw or undercooked shellfish may contain bacteria, parasites or viruses, these foods require special care. If you choose to serve and eat raw shellfish, you need to take extra precautions in order to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. Keep raw oysters and clams refrigerated, and serve them on ice to ensure they remain cold at holiday buffets. And older adults, pregnant women, young children, and people with weakened immune systems are more vulnerable to the risks of foodborne illness, and should never eat raw or undercooked shellfish.
- When serving food on a buffet, always use holding trays, chafing dishes, and crock pots to keep foods hot. Never use holding trays to warm food up. They should only be used to hold food that is already warmed. Put serving trays on crushed ice to keep cold foods cold. Don't let food stay at room temperature for more than two hours.

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