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Prevent Illness with Safe Food Practices During the Holidays!

(Sacramento, CA) – The holiday season is here, and food safety is especially important as you prepare your Thanksgiving meal. Sacramento County Environmental Management Department’s (EMD) food safety specialists and Sacramento County Public Health say improper preparation of meals and handling of leftovers can make you sick. Each of us can play a role in preventing foodborne illness with good personal hygiene and safe food practices at home.

“During the past several years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has investigated outbreaks of foodborne illness that were caused by bacteria in chicken, spinach, lettuce, peanut butter, cantaloupes, mangoes, frozen pizza, and frozen beef patties,” said EMD’s John Rogers. “Foodborne illness can usually be prevented by the proper handling of raw meats and vegetables when preparing and cooking your meal, including storing leftovers. Frequent hand-washing is another important safety tip for all of us to remember as we prepare holiday feasts and spend time with family and friends,” Rogers said.

SAFE TURKEY 101

When preparing a turkey, be aware of five important safety issues: thawing, preparing, stuffing, cooking to proper temperature, and handling of leftovers.

Safe Thawing

Thawing turkeys must be kept at a safe temperature. The "danger zone" is between 41 and 135°F — the temperature range where foodborne bacteria multiply rapidly. While frozen, a turkey is safe for up to six months, but as soon as it begins to thaw, bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again, if it is in the "danger zone." There are three safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in a microwave oven.

Safe Preparation

Bacteria present on raw poultry can contaminate your hands, utensils, and work surfaces as you prepare the turkey. If these areas are not cleaned thoroughly before working with other foods, bacteria from the raw poultry can then be transferred. After working with raw poultry, always wash your hands, utensils, and work surfaces before they touch other foods. Use soap and warm water and wash your hands for at least 20 seconds.

Safe Stuffing

For optimal safety and uniform doneness, cook the stuffing outside the turkey in a casserole dish. However, if you place stuffing inside the turkey, do so just before cooking, and use a food thermometer. Make sure the center of the stuffing reaches a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F. Bacteria can survive in stuffing that has not reached 165°F, possibly resulting in foodborne illness.

Safe Cooking

Set the oven temperature no lower than 325°F and be sure the turkey is completely thawed. Place turkey breast-side up on a flat wire rack in a shallow roasting pan 2 to 2-1/2 inches deep. Check the internal temperature at the center of the stuffing and meaty portion of the breast, thigh, and wing joint using a food thermometer. Cooking times will vary. The food thermometer must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F. Let the turkey stand 20 minutes before removing all stuffing from the cavity and carving the meat.

Handling Leftovers

Perishable foods should not be left out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours. For optimum results, remove turkey meat from the bone and promptly refrigerate or freeze leftovers in shallow containers. It is safe to freeze leftover turkey and trimmings — even if you purchased them frozen. Wrap tightly for best quality.

Leftover Storage Timeframes

Refrigerator (41°F or below)

Cooked turkey 3 to 4 days

Cooked dishes and gravy 3 to 4 days

Freezer (0 °F or below)

Turkey, plain; slices or pieces 4 mos.

Turkey covered with broth or gravy 6 mos.

Cooked poultry dishes, stuffing, and gravy 4-6 mos.

Reheating a Whole Turkey is NOT Recommended. If you plan to reheat a turkey, cut the meat into smaller pieces. Slice breast meat. Legs and wings may be left whole. Refrigerate in shallow containers. After removing from refrigeration, reheat turkey to 165°F prior to serving.

Remember to handle food safely to protect you and your family.

Happy Holidays!