

Holidays are not the time to forget about food safety

The holidays are always a joyous time filled with friends, family and FOOD! In this busy time, you don't want to make a mistake with your food handling or safety and end up sick when you could be spending that time with your friends and family. With that in mind, I would like to share some important tips from the FDA on keeping your family and yourself safe from foodborne illnesses this holiday season.

Typical symptoms of foodborne illness are vomiting, diarrhea, and flu-like symptoms, which can start anywhere from hours to days after contaminated food or drinks are consumed. The symptoms usually are not long-lasting in healthy people — a few hours or a few days — and usually go away without medical treatment. But foodborne illness can be severe and even life-threatening to anyone, especially those most at risk: older adults, infants and young children, pregnant women, people with diabetes, HIV/AIDS, cancer, or any condition that weakens their immune system, and people who take medicines that suppress the immune system; for example, some medicines for lupus, psoriasis and rheumatoid arthritis.

The first rule of safe food preparation in the home is to keep everything clean. Make sure to wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling any food. For children, this means the time it takes to sing 'Happy Birthday' twice. Also make sure to wash food-contact surfaces (cutting boards, dishes, utensils, countertops) with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before going on to the next item. Don't forget to rinse fruits and vegetables thoroughly under cool running water and use a produce brush to remove surface dirt. And when dealing with meats, do not rinse raw meat and poultry before cooking. Washing these foods makes it more likely for bacteria to spread to areas around the sink and countertops.

The second rule of safe food preparation is to keep your foods separate. Don't give bacteria the opportunity to spread from one food to another (cross-contamination). Keep raw eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, and their juices away from foods that won't be cooked. Take this precaution while shopping in the store, when storing in the refrigerator at home, and while preparing meals. You might consider using one cutting board only for foods that will be cooked (such as raw meat, poultry, and seafood) and another one for those that will not (such as raw fruits and vegetables). It's also important to keep fruits and vegetables that will be eaten raw separate from other foods such as raw meat, poultry or seafood — and from kitchen utensils used for those products. And finally, do not put cooked meat or other food that is ready to eat on an unwashed plate that has held any raw eggs, meat, poultry, seafood, or their juices.

The third rule of safe food preparation is to cook it properly. Food is safely cooked when it reaches a high enough internal temperature to kill harmful bacteria. Remember that color is not a reliable indicator of doneness. Use a food thermometer to make sure meat, poultry, and fish are cooked to a safe internal temperature. To check a turkey for safety, insert a food thermometer into the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. The turkey is safe when the temperature reaches 165°F. If the turkey is stuffed, the temperature of the stuffing should be 165°F. Bring sauces, soups, and gravies to a rolling boil when reheating. Make sure to cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm. When making your own eggnog or other recipe calling for raw eggs, use pasteurized shell eggs, liquid or frozen pasteurized egg products, or powdered egg whites. Although it can be a nice treat, don't eat uncooked cookie dough, which may contain raw eggs.

When everything is done make sure not to waste the leftovers and get the foods that need to be refrigerated properly chilled. Refrigerate foods quickly because harmful bacteria grow rapidly at room temperature. Something to check and do first is to set your refrigerator at or below 40°F and the freezer at 0°F. Check both periodically with an appliance thermometer. Then make sure to refrigerate leftovers and takeout foods — and *any* type of food that should be refrigerated — within two hours. That includes pumpkin pie! When getting food ready to prepare, never defrost food at room temperature. Food can be defrosted safely in the refrigerator, under cold running water, or in the microwave. Food thawed in cold water or in the microwave should be cooked immediately. With that also remember to allow the correct amount of time to properly thaw food. For example, a 20-pound turkey needs four to five days to thaw completely when thawed in the refrigerator. If in doubt, don't taste food that looks or smells questionable. A good rule to follow is, when in doubt, throw it out. Just don't wait too long because leftovers should be used within three to four days.

Following these simple rules should help to make sure that you have a safe and joyous holiday gathering. And with that Rawlins County Extension and I would like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! The Extension Office will be closed from December 23 through January 2 for a combination of vacation and holiday leave. Please keep an eye on our website and Facebook page for information about upcoming educational programs and if you have any other questions, please feel free to contact the Extension Office.