

Hand washing critical to avoiding illness over holidays, expert says

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A Purdue University expert says food safety this holiday season should start with soap.

"It's cold season," said Laura Palmer, a Cooperative Extension Service specialist in foods and nutrition and a registered dietitian. "There are many germs, and you will be around many people over the next few months, whether as the cook or a guest. It all comes down to proper hand washing if you want to decrease your chances of getting sick."

Palmer recommends washing hands not only after using the restroom and before and after food preparation, but also after handling raw meats and other foods that can contaminate ready-to-eat items. Hand washing also is a good idea after touching telephones, cameras and other frequently used items.

"Be sure to work soap into a lather for 20 seconds," Palmer said. "Wash around rings and under fingernails. Rinse hands thoroughly under running water and use a dry paper towel to turn the faucet off. It doesn't do any good to wash your hands if you touch the knobs everyone turned on with dirty hands."

Preventing sickness during the holidays, especially food-borne illness, requires vigilance from both cooks and partygoers, Palmer said. To stay healthy during the holidays, Palmer offers the following food tips:

* If you're cooking, start with a clean kitchen. Look beyond countertops by wiping down the refrigerator and oven door handles, drawer handles

and faucets. Use separate cutting boards for meat and fresh produce or cheese. Sanitize all work surfaces and utensils following food preparation.

* Keep in mind the two-hour rule. Don't leave perishable food out at room temperature for more than two hours. Bacteria can grow, leading to illness.

* Beware of buffets. Buffets are fun ways to offer a variety of food to crowds, but take care that items are served appropriately. Deli meat and seafood items should be served over ice or otherwise kept cold. Cheeses and dips made with dairy products also should be kept chilled. If you notice that such items aren't set out properly, opt for a different snack.

* Use food thermometers to cook foods to a proper internal temperature. The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers guidelines on cooking temperatures for a variety of foods online at www.fsis.usda.gov/Is_It_Done_Yet/index.asp

* When reheating leftovers, be sure food is heated to 165 degrees. Simply "warming up" food does not protect against illness. Cold foods should be kept at 40 degrees or lower.

Source: Purdue University

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