

Avoid food poisoning this holiday season

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The last thing a holiday host wants is to have guests get food poisoning from the feast they've set.

That's why [food safety](#) is particularly important as people prepare for holiday festivities, poison control center experts say.

"Forgetting about [food](#) safety is a recipe for disaster," [Dr. Diane Calello](#), executive medical director of the New Jersey Poison Control Center at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School in Newark, said in a news release. "No matter how busy your kitchen gets during the holidays, always remember the risks of improperly handling food."

Each year an estimated 48 million Americans are sickened by [food poisoning](#), 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

During [holiday season](#) last November and December, the New Jersey Poison Control Center alone received more than 200 calls asking about food poisoning, food preparation, serving and storage, experts said.

Calello advises that people remember four steps for food safety: clean, separate, cook and chill.

Folks should wash their hands often during [food preparation](#), using warm water and soap. They also should rinse fruit and vegetables clean.

Keeping [raw meats](#), poultry and seafood separate from other food that requires no further cooking can prevent cross-contamination, Calello said.

They should be kept separate when [grocery shopping](#) and in the refrigerator, and people should use separate cutting boards for each during preparation, she said.

When cooking, people should use a thermometer to make sure foods are cooked to a safe internal temperature.

And once the meal's done, people should immediately store leftovers in a fridge that's below 40 degrees. Perishable food should be refrigerated within two hours.

Calello also recommends that people never thaw frozen food on a counter, since foodborne germs can grow very quickly in foods left at room temperature for more than two hours. Thaw instead in the fridge, in cold water or in the microwave.

Holiday cooks should hand their duties over to someone else if they have sniffles, Calello advises.

"Don't prepare food if you have any kind of respiratory illness or infection, as this puts your guests at risk of becoming ill," she said.

Common questions the Poison Control Center gets during the holidays include:

- **"I ate stuffing cooked in the turkey. Will I get sick?"** Maybe not, but it's not a good idea to cook stuffing inside a turkey. It's more likely to be inadequately cooked: Harmful bacteria from the turkey can survive in stuffing that's not reached a temperature of 165 degrees at the center.
- **"The pot brownies we made for adult guests wound up on the dessert table, and some kids got into them. What do we do?"** Marijuana edibles at home should be locked up to prevent accidental ingestion. Children are at much higher risk than adults for severe health effects from weed edibles.

Food poisoning can develop within a few hours of eating contaminated food. Symptoms include nausea, vomiting, [stomach cramps](#), diarrhea and fever.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [food safety](#).

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