

Wash Your Hands...Not the Turkey

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As the holiday season rapidly approaches, many cooks are getting ready to share meals with family members and loved ones. Lots of myths exist about how to make sure your food is safe. Here are a few of them.

Myth #1

You should rinse your poultry before you cook it.

Fact #1

Rinsing poultry will not remove bacteria, and in fact can spread the raw juices around your sink, the countertop, and onto any food nearby, not to mention your hands. This can cause cross contamination. You can only kill bacteria in your food by cooking it to 165°F, as measured by a food thermometer. So treat yourself this year by buying a thermometer, and then cook your turkey in an oven set to at least 325°F. Only serve turkey or poultry when the internal cooking temperature reaches 165°F.

Myth #2

You should never put hot food in the refrigerator.

Fact #2

We no longer depend on blocks of ice to help our food stay cold. Our new, modern appliances are very good at cooling food down quickly. So, following your meal, take the meat off the bones and divide it into smaller portions. Place your containers in the fridge.

If you leave food out on the counter for more than two hours it is not safe, since bacteria can double every 15 or 20 minutes at room temperature. Think of it this way, if you have one bacterium on food that is left out at room temperature for seven hours you will now have 2,097,152 bacteria by morning. Do you want to eat leftovers or bacteria? As few as 10 bacteria from E coli can cause you to get sick, less than would multiply after one hour. Don't take chances. Remember you can't see, taste, or smell bacteria, so be safe. Cook your food to the right temperature and get it in the fridge right after your meal.

Myth #3

I can tell by looking at food that it is cooked.

Fact #3

No way. The safest way to determine if the food you have cooked is safe to eat is to use a food thermometer. Don't think that because turkey juices run clear or your hamburger is brown, that the food is cooked. Use a food thermometer and check the food's temperature. Remember, poultry needs to cook to 165°F and ground beef to 160°F.

Myth #4

I have been cooking for years and no one has every gotten sick from eating my food.

Fact #4

You never know. Over 76 million people in the United States get food borne illnesses every year. That's one out of every four Americans. People get sick from food prepared at restaurants or at home, picked up

at fast food restaurants, or served at catered events. No matter how clean you and your kitchen may be, chances are that at some point someone has gotten sick from food you have prepared and served.

Myth #5

If you get sick from food it was probably from the last thing you ate.

Fact #5

Maybe, maybe not. Some food pathogens can begin to show symptoms within an hour after eating, others can take several weeks. For example, it normally takes 8 to 72 hours for salmonella symptoms to appear. So the sickness you blame on your local restaurant at lunch may just be something you prepared a few nights ago.

Myth #6

Lemon juice and salt will clean and sanitize your cutting boards.

Fact #6

While lemon juice and salt might *clean* your cutting board, you can only *sanitize* with a product designed to kill pathogens. Put a mixture of one teaspoon of household bleach and one quart of water into a spray bottle. After cleaning, spray your cutting board and let stand for 30 seconds. Then rinse and dry off your cutting board and you are ready to go. After you clean your countertops you can use the bleach spray and let it stand overnight. Your solution will not leave a bleach residue on your cutting board or counters and your kitchen will be safe.

There are many more food safety myths. If you aren't sure whether or not your food is safe, call the UNH Cooperative Extension Information Center at 1-877-398-4769 and trained volunteers will answer your food safety questions. If you have access to the internet try this website: www.fightbac.org. You can get research based information on how to make sure the food you prepare and serve this holiday season will be safe.