

## **Holiday Buffet Safety Tips**

*By Jeremy DeLisle, UNH Education Center Program Coordinator*

***Q: Every Thanksgiving, my family gathers for a big potluck buffet – and food sometimes stays out for hours. How can I make sure the food is handled properly and stays safe to eat? Frank S – Bow, NH***

A: When it comes to food safety, we are fortunate to have reliable resources to guide us as we prepare the meals for those who mean the most to us. Whether its turkey or ham, veggies or sweets, it's important that we understand and follow good food safety practices each step of the way.

Bacteria are everywhere, and a few types especially like to crash parties. These bacteria can cause illness and are spread by improper food handling. Follow these guidelines to keep everyone at your table safe and healthy.

### **Cleanliness is Key**

Always wash your hands before and after handling food. Keep your kitchen, dishes, and utensils clean and serve food on clean plates. Never use plates or dishes previously in contact with raw meat and poultry. Bacteria which may have been present in raw meat juices can cross contaminate the food to be served.

### **Monitor Cooking Temperatures**

Cooking meats to the proper temperature is the best way to ensure they are safe to eat. The USDA recommends cooking all raw beef, pork, and lamb portions to a minimum internal temperature of 145 °F. Measure the temperature with a food thermometer. For safety and quality, allow meat to rest for a few minutes before carving or consuming. Raw ground beef, pork, lamb, and veal should be cooked to an internal temperature of 160 °F. Cook all poultry to a safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F.

### **Storing, Reheating, and Serving**

We all know that cooking for large holiday gatherings often starts a couple of days beforehand. The USDA recommends best food safety practices for that scenario, too.

Divide cooked foods into shallow containers to store in the refrigerator or freezer until serving. This encourages quick, even cooling. Reheat hot foods to 165 °F. Arrange and serve food on multiple small platters rather than on one large platter. Keep the rest of the food hot in the oven (set at 200 - 250 °F) or cold in the refrigerator until serving time. This way foods will be held at a safe temperature for a longer period of time.

Replace empty platters rather than adding fresh food to a dish that already had food in it. With many people's hands touching the food, including busy little children, it's best to start fresh as you continue to serve your guests.

Remember the Two-Hour Rule. Foods should not sit at room temperature for more than two hours. Keep track of how long foods have been sitting on the buffet table and discard anything that's been there for two hours or more.

Hot foods should stay hot and cold foods cold. Hot foods should be held at 140 °F or warmer. On the table you can keep hot foods hot with chafing dishes, slow cookers like crock pots, or warming trays.

Cold foods should be held at 40 °F or colder. Keep foods cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice. Otherwise, use small serving trays and replace them frequently.

For additional resources, visit the [Food Safety at Home](#) section of the UNH Cooperative Extension Website, and check out the article [Food Safety Tips for a Healthy Holiday](#) by Extension Food Safety Specialist, Jessica Sprague.

*UNH Cooperative Extension's Education Center answers questions about gardening and more at [answers@unh.edu](mailto:answers@unh.edu) or by calling 877-398-4769 Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.*