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Contact: Gary Sky, Public Information Officer (303) 846-6245

Safe Turkey Preparation Tips

Millions of Americans are planning a traditional Thanksgiving holiday dinner of turkey with all the trimmings, and following a few simple health precautions during preparation can keep everyone at the dinner table and out of the emergency room.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 76 million illnesses were caused last year by mishandled food. These foodborne illnesses resulted in 300,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.

“Foodborne illness can spread at this time of year due to undercooked poultry and improper sanitation,” according Richard L. Vogt, MD, Executive Director of Tri-County Health Department. When it comes to food temperatures and storage, Vogt adds some easy-to-remember advice. “Keep it hot, keep it cold, or do not keep it at all.” He also offers the following suggestions:

- Defrost frozen turkeys in the refrigerator, not at room temperature, since bacteria can grow. Thaw 24 hours for each five pounds of weight. A ten-pounder takes two days, a 20-pounder takes four days. Even after it fully defrosts, an uncooked turkey is still safe in a cold refrigerator (35-40°F) for two or three days.
- Cook poultry to an internal temperature of 165°F, measured with a meat thermometer inserted deep into the breast meat.
- Cook and serve the stuffing in a separate pan. Stuffing placed in the cavity of the bird may not cook to a high enough temperature to kill bacteria absorbed from the turkey juices.
- Insist that everyone washes hands thoroughly with warm, soapy water before preparing any food, after handling any uncooked meat and again before eating.

- Clean and sanitize knives, cutting boards, counter tops and platters after exposure to raw meat in order to prevent cross-contamination onto any ready-to-eat foods.
- Do not leave food out at room temperature for more than two hours after serving.
- Carve the meat from the bones, store meat and stuffing separately in shallow containers, and freeze leftovers or use them within four days. Reheat leftovers to 165°F before serving.
- Do not give turkey bones to pets.

For more information on turkey preparation or food safety, call the Butterball Turkey Talk-Line at 1-800-288-8372, visit their website at www.butterball.com or visit the National Turkey Federation at www.eatturkey.com.

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