

Script – Print – Play It Smart with Holiday Eating

Food Safety A Must During Any Gathering

Eating is a huge part of any holiday celebration or get-together. But if you're not careful with preparation and treatment of your special feast, your party could go from festive to misery before you even get the decorations packed away and the tree taken down.

Food poisoning cases tend to increase in November and December, because many traditional holiday foods include raw ingredients such as egg, meat or unpasteurized milk. That's why health experts like Nicole O'Neill, a clinical dietitian for OSF HealthCare, stress the importance of playing it extra safe this time of the year.

"Make sure you're always washing your hands before you prepare," says O'Neill. "If you can get all of your guests to wash their hands before they join the buffet line that is an excellent way to keep everyone safe. Make sure your hot foods stay hot and your cold foods stay cold. There are lots of products out there that can help you do that. Make sure you have a great thermometer. One that you use through the entire process, and make sure you clean your thermometer between different foods so you don't accidentally cross-contaminate."

Another important reminder is to keep all food separated. Remember to keep meat, chicken, seafood and eggs separate from other foods in your shopping cart and in the refrigerator. Store these items in containers or plastic bags to ensure their juices won't leak or drip onto other foods.

"You don't want to ever mix things," says O'Neill. "In your refrigerator all your meat should be on the bottom and away from everything else. Your fruits and vegetables should be separate too. You don't ever want to mix raw and ready to eat things together because that's an easy cross-contamination. It's easy for bacteria to move back and forth."

Cook food thoroughly until it's done. A food thermometer is a helpful instrument that helps determine that the meat, chicken or seafood is properly cooked to a safe internal temperature.

O'Neill says bacteria can grow quickly in the danger zone between 40°F and 140°F. Perishable foods should be refrigerated within two hours of preparation or serving.

"Make sure you cook your food properly to the right temperature; there are a lot of charts out there, or you can buy magnets to put on your fridge," says O'Neill. "Certain meats should be cooked to a certain temperature, which means you have to have a thermometer. There are many versions. Some you can leave in the meat or in the oven. As you cook – you pull the thermometer out and you're good to go."

And who doesn't love a nibble of raw cookie dough or batter? If you do, O'Neill says to walk away. Dough for cookies, cakes, pies and other treats is made with eggs or flour that can contain E. coli and Salmonella. If you simply can't resist, shop for edible cookie dough that uses pasteurized eggs or no eggs. Pay attention to labels.

The bottom line, O'Neill says, is to take the extra steps to ensure your meal or appetizers doesn't leave your guests feeling blue this holiday season. After all, no one wants a gift that keeps on giving.

"Everyone needs to be super safe especially if you are going to have other people in your home," she says. "You have to, that's all there is to it."

For more information on food safety, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).