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DPHHS offers holiday food safety tips

The Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) and local public agencies are offering food safety tips to help Montanans stay healthy this holiday season.

“As we plan for visitors and prepare for festivities, food safety can be the last thing we think about,” said Ed Evanson of the DPHHS Food and Consumer Safety Section. “Being safe while preparing food is easier than people think. Keeping these guidelines in mind will help ensure that you and your family can have a happy and healthy Turkey Day.”

Safe Storage

- Make sure there is ample room in the refrigerator for everything that you plan on storing. Not having adequate room for air circulation may cause foods to not cool properly and may cause mechanical problems in the unit.
- Consider all the space that will be needed to store frozen and refrigerated items. You should also consider how you will keep foods hot and cold during mealtime and plan accordingly.

Handwashing

- Handwashing is the most effective way to ensure that food contamination does not occur. You should wash your hands before food preparation begins, when switching between foods, after handling raw meats, or whenever your hands get dirty.
- Remember, to follow these steps for proper handwashing: first wet your hands with clean running water; then lather your hands with soap for 20 seconds, don't forget your nails and between your fingers; rinse your hands with water; and then dry them using a clean towel.

Thawing

- Turkeys should only be thawed in the refrigerator, in the microwave, or under cold running water; never on the counter. The first three methods allow the turkey to keep a safe temperature throughout, while the last does not.
- You should keep in mind that using your refrigerator to thaw your turkey may take three to four days, depending on what temperature you keep the refrigerator at and how big the bird is.

- It is important to remember not to rinse the turkey before cooking, as rinsing will only spread bacteria.

Safe Food Preparation

- Use different cutting boards for vegetables and different types of meat. If multiple boards are not available, thoroughly wash the boards between uses.
- Place food items in the refrigerator so contamination is prevented. This can be achieved by placing items that will not be cooked on the top shelf of the refrigerator, and then store raw meats according to cook temperatures. The best arrangement would be foods that have already been cooked and foods that will not be cooked on the top shelf, then raw pork, beef, seafood, and eggs, then raw ground meats, and raw poultry and game meat on the bottom shelf.
- For example, a vegetable tray and pie would be stored at the top of the refrigerator, raw beef and raw eggs would be stored in the middle, and the turkey and other poultry would be stored at the bottom.

Cooking

- The amount of time it takes to cook your turkey will depend on the size of the bird (plan on about 20 minutes per pound). A meat thermometer should be used to ensure the entire turkey reaches **165° F**.
- The thermometer should be used in three places: innermost part of the thigh, innermost part of the wing, and thickest part of the breast.
- Slow cooking or partially cooking the turkey should be avoided. If possible, cook the stuffing separately.
- Serve hot foods promptly after cooking to ensure that the food remains safe.

Leftovers

- Leftovers should be put away within 2 hours of eating. As with storing food before the feast, make sure there is ample room for air flow to ensure that everything cools properly. Store leftovers in small, shallow containers to assist with quick cooling.
- Leftovers should be consumed within 3 days, or moved to the freezer.
- Leftovers should always be reheated to at least **165° F** and gravy should be brought to a boil before serving.

Most importantly and to avoid the risks of foodborne illness: When in doubt throw it out!

For more information go to the DPHHS Food and Consumer Safety website at dphhs.mt.gov and click on the “Thanksgiving” banner.