

Preparing Food for a Crowd

Your family may enjoy meals, day after day, and never get sick from foodborne illness. Then comes a big family gathering or a large party. You are handling larger amounts of food; your refrigerator is overcrowded. Food is prepared in advance and sometimes not stored properly. Also, you may serve the food buffet-style and it stands and stands as your guests come and go. People pick over the food. Later on, some may complain of diarrhea, vomiting and other problems. What has gone wrong? The answer may be food poisoning. Bacteria cause food poisoning. All they need to grow is the right combination of time and temperature. If you follow these simple rules you can avoid trouble.

PLAN YOUR PARTY FOR SAFETY

- Plan ahead on ways you can keep hot food hot and cold food cold. Can you borrow or rent the necessary chafing dishes or warmers, for example?
- Arrange to have enough large serving dishes so that you can bring the cold food from the refrigerator or the hot food from the oven frequently and replace dishes on the table.
- Check to see if you have enough dishes and utensils for eating; the disposable kinds are often better. Hasty washing often means that dishes and utensils are used when they are not properly cleaned.
- Figure how much refrigerator space you'll need to store foods. Keep the temperature at 40 °F or below. Contrary to common belief, refrigerating warm food does not cause it to spoil. However, do not put so much warm food in the refrigerator that it raises the temperature. When your

refrigerator is overcrowded, the temperature may rise enough to cause increased bacterial action.

- Never put deep containers of hot food in the refrigerator. Put hot food in shallow containers so it will chill quickly.
- Do not hold prepared foods in the refrigerator more than a day or two. If you prepare them further in advance, plan to freeze them.

PLAN TO PREPARE AND SERVE — SAFELY

Food that has been contaminated and allowed to remain at room temperature for four hours can cause a gastrointestinal upset. If it takes two hours to make a chicken salad and it is refrigerated overnight and the next day it is left on the buffet table for two hours, the total time at room temperature is four hours. Putting food in the refrigerator slows the contamination process; it does not stop it. The most perishable foods are those containing meat, poultry, seafood, eggs or milk.

- Make sure you have clean work surfaces and clean utensils to prepare food. After handling raw meats or poultry, wash your hands well. Also, make sure that all those who help prepare the food have clean hands washed with soap and hot water.
- Never place other foods on a surface where you have had raw meat or poultry until you have thoroughly cleaned it. It is good to have two cutting boards — one for use with raw meat and poultry only, the other for sandwiches, salads and cooked foods. This prevents the spread of bacteria.

- When you taste food, use a tasting spoon only once then wash it before you use it again.
- At events such as buffets where food is set out for guests, serve only what is needed and replace often so foods are kept at proper temperatures.
- Avoid adding fresh foods to foods that have been sitting out. Prepare a number of smaller platters and dishes ahead of time that can be stored in the refrigerator and then be brought directly to the table.
- For added safety, set foods out on ice or over a heat source to keep them out of the temperature “danger zone.”

Keep Hot Foods Hot (Above 140 °F): Bacteria grow best in lukewarm foods. Keep protein foods such as seafood, poultry and cooked meats hot by using an electric hot tray or chafing dish. Small candle warming units may not keep hot foods hot enough. Never let these foods stand at room temperature for more than two hours (including preparation, storage and serving time).

Keep Cold Foods Cold (Below 40 °F): Cream pies, puddings, seafood salads and many other dishes made with eggs, fish, meat and poultry need to be kept cold. This keeps dangerous bacteria from growing. Do not let these foods stand at room temperature more than two hours (including preparation, storage and serving time).

SPECIAL SAFETY PROBLEMS

Poultry and Meats: Are you going to serve roast turkey? Stuffing can be a breeding place for bacteria. Do not stuff the turkey; cook it separately. After mixing a large quantity of stuffing, cook it immediately. Letting large masses of lukewarm stuffing stand at room temperature encourages bacteria to grow.

Before refrigerating or freezing, remove chicken or turkey meat from the bones immediately after cooking. This is a time-consuming process, and often it is done during odd moments between other jobs. This means the food may stand at room temperature for long periods. If the food is contaminated with bacteria and held at room temperature long enough, the bacteria will produce a harmful toxin. Once this toxin is produced

in the food, it is not destroyed by ordinary cooking. If ham is sliced or ground, work with small amounts and store properly in refrigerator.

Gravy: Broth and gravy are especially subject to spoilage. Cool leftovers quickly and put them in the refrigerator. Don’t hold broth and gravy more than a day or two. To serve again, reheat and boil for several minutes before serving. Always serve hot.

Sandwiches and Salads: Ham sandwiches, turkey and chicken salads, and deviled eggs need special care. If you serve sandwiches, why not plan to have the kind you can freeze ahead? Thaw them as needed. Are you going to serve chicken salad? Why not freeze the cubes of chicken and use them in preparing the salad? They will thaw as the salad stands, keeping it as cold as possible.

With any salad, there is much handling in preparation and serving. Make sure all ingredients are clean and well-chilled. Mixtures of foods that require several steps and handling such as meats, fish and salads are most likely to be contaminated. Use clean hands, utensils and work surfaces.

Cream Pies and Puddings: Cream, custard and meringue pies and other foods with custard fillings are often involved in food poisoning. Since these foods get soggy if refrigerated too long, it is a temptation to leave them at room temperature. **DO NOT DO IT!** This encourages bacteria to grow. Fill pastry as close to serving time as possible.

PARTY LEFTOVERS

- Refrigerate or freeze leftovers promptly after eating. If food is left at room temperature for over two hours, bacteria can grow to harmful levels and the food may no longer be safe. Put them in shallow dishes so they cool faster. For thicker foods — such as stews, hot puddings and layers of meat slices — limit depth of food to 2 inches.
- Follow the same cooling guidelines for foods that are cooked ahead to be reheated at a later time. For greatest safety, eat leftovers in a day or two. Frozen foods will keep longer.

- Loosely cover leftovers to allow heat to escape and to protect from accidental contamination during cooling. Stir food occasionally to help it cool; use a clean spoon each time. Cover tightly when cooled.
- When serving leftovers, bring sauces, soups and gravies to a boil. Heat other leftovers thoroughly to 165 °F or until steamy hot throughout.
- Do not let huge quantities of party leftovers fill your refrigerator for days. Plan in advance for ways that you can use the foods. Then freeze the rest. If you have doubts about a leftover, do not use it. Throw it out. Food poisoning does not necessarily smell or taste badly. Just because the food does not seem spoiled does not necessarily mean that it is all right to eat.
- Refrigerate cold foods at 40 °F or lower until serving time.
- If the food is hot, and you'll be eating within two hours, keep it hot (140 °F) in a 200 °F to 250 °F oven.
- If you are picking up hot foods far in advance, refrigerate them. "Thick foods" such as stews and layers of meat slices should be put in shallow dishes and limited to a depth of 2 inches so they cool faster.
- Reheat them later for serving by heating until steamy hot throughout.

SOURCES:

1. Mississippi State University Extension Service. *Feeding a Crowd? Do it Safely*. Prepared by Dr. Evelyn Spindler, March 1998.
2. University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension. *Holiday Food Safety*. Prepared by Alice Henneman, November 1996.

This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by P.H. Schmutz, HGIC Information Specialist, and E.H. Hoyle, Extension Food Safety Specialist, Clemson University.

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TAKE-OUT FOODS

- First, take the food home immediately. Do not leave take-out foods at room temperature longer than two hours.