

Feeding a Crowd? Do It Safely

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 remains without temperature control 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 may 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 kind is 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, don't 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.

Don't 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

Make sure you have clean and sanitized work surfaces and clean and sanitized 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 previously have had raw meat or poultry until you have thoroughly cleaned and sanitized it. It is good to have two cutting boards—one for use with raw meat and poultry only, the other for sandwiches, salads, and other ready-to-eat 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.

Food that has been contaminated and allowed to remain at room temperature for 4 hours can cause gastrointestinal upset. If it takes 2 hours to make a chicken salad and it is refrigerated overnight and the next day it is left on the buffet table for 2 hours, the total time at room temperature is 4 hours. Putting food in the refrigerator slows the contamination process; it doesn't stop it.

The most perishable foods are those containing meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, or milk.

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 2 hours (including preparation, storage, and serving time).



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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 2 hours (including preparation, storage, and serving time).

Don't put out large quantities of these foods at one time. Serve only what is needed and replace often so foods are kept as cold as possible. Serve these foods in containers that can be stored in the refrigerator and then be brought directly to the table.

Special Safety Problems

Poultry & Meats

Are you going to serve roast turkey? Stuffing can be a breeding place for bacteria. Don't stuff the turkey before cooking it. Instead, cook the turkey and the stuffing 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, ordinary cooking will not destroy it.

If ham is sliced or ground, work with small amounts and store properly in the refrigerator.

Gravy

Broth and gravy are especially quick to spoil. 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 & 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 much handling such as meats, fish, and salads are most likely to be contaminated. Use clean hands, utensils, and work surfaces.

Cream Pies & 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. Don't! This encourages bacteria to grow. Fill pastries as close to serving time as possible.

Using Party Leftovers

Don't 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, don't use it. Throw it out. Food poisoning does not necessarily have a bad smell or taste. Just because the food doesn't seem spoiled doesn't necessarily mean that it is OK to eat.



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