



NEWS RELEASE

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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Prevent foodborne illnesses this holiday season

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Recent foodborne outbreaks that resulted in hospitalizations should alert Alabamians to follow safe food preparation and storage practices. As the holidays approach and the number of parties, covered-dish meals and family gatherings increase, the Alabama Department of Public Health promotes safe food handling practices.

“We want to emphasize to the community the importance of preventing foodborne illnesses that could make you and your family too sick to enjoy the holidays,” Dr. Mary McIntyre, Assistant State Health Officer for Disease Control and Prevention, said. “Cross contamination of food can occur any time harmful germs, such as bacteria, viruses or parasites are transferred from one food to another.”

Food safety starts at the time you purchase food and take it to the kitchen. Be sure to separate raw food from ready-to-eat food during transport, storage and preparation.

Some simple food safety tips are summarized here:

Clean: Wash hands and food-contact surfaces often. Bacteria can spread throughout the kitchen and get onto cutting boards, knives, sponges and counter tops. Rinse all fresh fruit and vegetables under running water. Use different cutting boards for raw meats and fresh vegetables.

Separate: Do not cross-contaminate — do not let bacteria spread from one food product to another. This is especially true for raw meat, poultry and seafood. Keep these foods and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods.

Cook: Cook to proper temperatures. Foods are properly cooked when they are heated for a long enough time and at a high enough temperature to kill the harmful bacteria that cause foodborne illness. Poultry and stuffing should be cooked to a minimum temperature of 165 degrees F. Use a thermometer in the thickest, most dense part of the food to be sure. When microwaving, cover, stir and rotate food for even cooking. Reheat sauces, soups and gravies to a boil. Minimizing the time foods are held in the hazardous temperature zone will lessen the chance of acquiring a foodborne illness. The time-proven rule applies: keep cold foods cold and hot foods hot.

Chill: Refrigerate foods promptly, because cold temperatures keep most harmful bacteria from growing and multiplying. Refrigerate or freeze foods within two hours because cold

temperatures slow harmful germ growth. Refrigerators should be set at 40 degrees F and freezers at 0 degrees F. Check the accuracy of the settings occasionally with a thermometer.

Report: Report suspected foodborne illnesses to your local health department. Often calls from concerned citizens are the way outbreaks are first detected. If a representative from public health contacts you to find out more about an illness you had, your cooperation is important.

Many of the foods of the holiday season may pose special challenges. For example, larger pieces of poultry mean a greater amount of thawing time is needed before cooking to destroy disease-causing bacteria. Perishable food also may be left too long on buffet tables, allowing bacteria to grow. Eggnog containing uncooked raw eggs can cause the intestinal infection called salmonellosis.

Those at greatest risk of foodborne illness are infants and young children, pregnant women, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems caused by cancer treatment, diabetes, AIDS, and bone marrow and organ transplants.

By remembering to handle potentially hazardous foods properly, you can help ensure your family and guests have safe and healthful holiday celebrations. Information is available on this site at adph.org. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has materials on the Partnership for Food Safety Education website (www.fightbac.org) such as "Limits to Leftovers" and how to shop for, handle, cook and store food that may be useful.