

## Keeping Potluck Meals Safe

**Foodborne Illnesses-** are most commonly caused by bacteria but can include viruses and parasites. This microorganism can be present in food but can't be seen, smelled or tasted. A more common term people use for foodborne illness is food poisoning.

**Perishable foods** - are those that require refrigeration. They include foods containing meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, eggs or milk products. They also include processed foods labeled "keep refrigerated."

Keeping food safe, particularly food prepared at home and brought to another location, is very important in reducing the risk of foodborne illness outbreak. Most cases of foodborne illness start in home kitchens not because of the food but by how the food was prepared.

The familiar flu-like symptoms of nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, cramps, fever, headache and muscle pain may not be the flu but a foodborne illness. For some people, elderly, very young, pregnant women and those who have a chronic illness, a foodborne illness can be life threatening.

***Why is there a potential problem with potluck meals?*** There's the potential for food handling errors at potluck meals. Some of the more obvious might include leaving perishable food at room temperature too long, cooking large amounts of food ahead of time and cooling it improperly, or failing to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Other factors to consider are: How was the dish prepared prior to the event? Were safe food handling practices adhered to?

***What should I bring to the potluck to reduce the risks associated with foodborne illness?***

Here's what you should think about before you decide what to bring:

- If the item is perishable, will you be able to keep it cold or hot until it is served?
- Will you be able to heat the food or keep it warm once you arrive at the event?
- Will there be refrigeration available at the event so foods can be kept cold?
- If you won't be able to keep cold foods cold or hot foods hot, consider bringing food that needs no refrigeration. Suggestions include bread, desserts, chips, pretzels or whole fruit.

***How can I make sure the food I bring to a potluck event is safe?***

Remember to follow four rules when handling food:

- **CLEAN:** Wash hands, utensils and surfaces with hot soapy water before and after food preparation. Using a disinfectant cleaner or a mixture of bleach and water on surfaces and antibacterial soap on hands can provide some added protection.
- **SEPARATE:** Never place cooked food on an unwashed plate that previously held raw meat, poultry, eggs or seafood. Don't mix fresh cooked food with old food.
- **COOK:** Cook food to the proper internal temperature, which varies for different cuts of meat and poultry, and check for doneness with a food thermometer.
- **CHILL:** Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared food and leftovers within two hours. Make sure the refrigerator is set at no higher than 40° F and that the freezer unit is set at 0° F.

## Specific Suggestions to Keep Your Potluck Meal Safe

### ***When you shop buy cold food last, get home fast.***

When you shop take food home straight to the refrigerator.

Don't buy anything you won't use before the use by date.

Don't buy food in poor condition.

### ***When you store food, keep it safe, refrigerate.***

To keep bacteria in check, your refrigerator should run at 40° F or below; the freezer unit at 0° F.

Use fresh meat, poultry or fish within a few days or freeze.

Place raw meat, poultry and fish packages so their juices won't drip on other food.

### ***When you prepare food, keep everything clean.***

Wash hands in hot soapy water before preparing food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers and handling pets.

Wash hands, cutting boards and utensils in hot soapy water after cutting raw meat, poultry or fish and before handling other foods.

Use a plastic cutting board rather than a wooden one where bacteria can hide in the grooves.

Always thaw food in the refrigerator.

### ***When you're cooking; cook thoroughly.***

Cook red meats to 160° F and poultry to 180° F. Use a meat thermometer to check for doneness.

Completely cook meat and poultry at one time; never partially cook dishes to warm later.

Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm. Don't use recipes in which raw eggs remain raw or only partially cooked.

When you cook food ahead, divide large portions of food into small, shallow containers for refrigeration. This ensures safe, rapid cooling.

### ***When you're transporting food, keep it safe.***

Use ice or cold packs to keep cold foods cold (40° F or below).

A thoroughly cooked casserole straight from the oven will stay hot for a short trip to the event if insulated well. Try several layers of aluminum wrap followed by newspapers and a towel.

Serve the casserole as soon as you arrive or return to the oven.

### ***When you serve the food, never leave it out over 2 hours.***

Use clean utensils to serve food.

Never leave perishable food out of the refrigerator over 2 hours!

Keep food in the refrigerator or on ice until served.

Use a warming unit to keep hot foods hot (above 140° F) (2004 CFP change to 135°F).

### ***What to do with leftovers.***

Any leftover perishable foods should be thrown out.

### ***Four Simple Food Safety Rules to Remember***

- Keep hot food hot (above 140° F)
- Keep cold food cold (below 40°F)
- Keep hands, work surfaces and utensils clean.
- Never leave perishable food out of the refrigerator over 2 hours.