



Safe Food for Holiday and Party Buffets

Festive times for giving and sharing should not include food-borne illnesses. Buffets are a common method for serving food at holiday celebrations and parties. This type of food service where foods are left out for long periods leave the door open for uninvited guests -- bacteria that cause food-borne disease. The most recent food-borne disease surveillance report identified improper holding temperatures as the most common food preparation habit contributing to food-borne disease followed by poor personal hygiene of food handlers. Unlike bacteria that cause food to spoil, harmful or food-borne disease causing bacteria typically cannot be identified by smell or taste. Following are prudent habits to help prevent food-borne illness at your buffet.

#1 DON'T BE A DOPE, WASH WITH SOAP

First rinse hands then wash vigorously (for at least 20 seconds) with soap and hot water followed by a second rinse and complete drying before and after handling food (particularly raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs), after using the restroom, after touching your hair, face, nose or mouth, and after touching pets or other animals. Keep kitchen, dishes, and utensils clean "clean as you go."

#2 HOT OR COLD IS HOW TO HOLD

Keep hot foods hot and colds foods cold. Avoid the "Danger Zone" between 40 and 140 degrees. Use smaller serving bowls or plates of food and set out fresh food as these are used. Do not add fresh food to a plate of food that has already been sitting at room temperature for an extended period of time. For added protection keep cold foods on ice and hot foods over a heat source to keep the food out of the danger zone. Keep hot foods covered to help retain heat and keep them from drying out.

#3 MORE THAN TWO IS BAD FOR YOU

Never leave perishable food at room temperature for over two hours. Perishable foods or ingredients include raw or cooked meat, poultry, seafood, dairy products and eggs. If perishable foods are left at room temperature for over two hours, bacteria can begin to grow to unsafe levels. The two hour limit includes preparation, serving, and clean up time.

#4 WATCH THAT PLATE, DON'T CONTAMINATE

"Cross contamination" occurs when bacteria are transferred from one food to another from direct or indirect contact. For example: immediately after cutting raw chicken, clean cutting board or surface and utensils with hot, soapy water before using for the preparation of ready-to-eat foods; avoid putting cooked meat on the plate that held the raw meat; place packages of raw meat, poultry or fish on plates on lower shelves of the refrigerator to prevent from dripping on other foods.

#5 COOK IT RIGHT, BEFORE YOU TAKE A BITE

Always cook perishable foods thoroughly. If harmful bacteria are present, only thorough cooking will destroy them. Freezing or refrigerating will stop or slow bacteria growth but will not kill them. Cook ground meats to an internal temperature of 160 degrees and ground poultry to 165 degrees. Steaks and roasts should be cooked to an internal temperature of 145 degrees for medium rare, 160 degrees for medium and 170 degrees for well done. Although poultry is safe to eat when cooked to a temperature of 165 degrees, for optimum quality the USDA recommends cooking poultry parts and whole poultry to 170 to 180 degrees. Egg dishes should be cooked to a temperature of 160 degrees. Use a meat thermometer to assure that meat, poultry and egg dishes reach a safe internal temperature.

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#6 DON'T GET SICK, COOK IT QUICK:

One of the most common causes of food-borne illness is improper cooling of cooked foods. Put leftovers in the refrigerator or freezer for longer storage promptly after eating. Divide large amounts of food into several smaller containers (the layer of food in the container should be no deeper than 2 inches) to allow for more rapid cooling. Do not completely seal container or packages containing hot or warm food until completely cool to allow for heat to escape. Refrigerate perishable foods in two hours.

#7 WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT:

If you are unsure whether the previous precautions were followed to be safe, throw it away. Throwing improperly handled food away maybe more economical than the inconvenience and cost of a foodborne illness. Remember different people have different tolerance levels to disease causing bacteria. The very young, older people and persons who are already ill are more susceptible to a food-borne illness.

REFERENCE

Adapted from: Seven Highly Effective Habits for Home Food Safety. Food Talk E-mail NewsLetter, Sept. 1997. University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County.

<http://ianrwww.unl.edu/ianr/lanco/FoodTalk.htm>

FSIS/USDA. 1994. Focus on: Holiday or Party Buffets.

<http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/buffets.htm>

USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1 (800) 535-4555.