

# Ask an Expert: Five Tips for Food Safety at Holiday Buffets

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The aromas of holiday foods often bring to mind the sweet memories of years past. Whether a large family gathering, office party or pot luck, the holidays are filled with traditional foods that bring people together. On the other hand, there may be in your memory a time where the result of such a gathering left you nauseous, vomiting or worse because of an episode of food-borne illness.

Let's take a closer look at buffets, whether at a restaurant or any type of gathering, and be aware of how to avoid becoming ill for the holidays. Following a few general tips should help keep you healthy.

1. Take time up front to be cautious and observant. If you are invited to be a guest at a buffet-style luncheon or dinner served at a family, community, work or church gathering, be cautious up front. Do a quick review of what food is available and how it is being kept hot or cold.

Ask yourself a few questions: Does the food look fresh? Do I trust that the person preparing the food had clean hands and avoided cross-contamination with raw meats or meat juices? Has the food been held at a safe temperature? The Food Safety Inspection Service specifies that hot food should be held at 140 F or warmer and cold food should be held at 40 F or colder. They also note that using the same knives and cutting surfaces to prepare a variety of foods is the main source of cross contamination leading to food-borne illness.

2. Notice how the food is being kept hot or cold. It is very important that food at a buffet is kept hot with chafing

dishes, slow cookers and warming trays and that food that requires refrigeration is kept cold by nesting dishes in bowls of ice or small serving trays that are replaced often.

If hot foods are not in a container keeping the food steaming hot using electrical power, an insulated chest or Sterno® burners, it is very difficult to keep foods at a safe temperature for more than 30 minutes. This is true for any low-acid food like vegetables, meats, soups, casseroles, etc.

Depending on the temperature of the room, foods containing dairy may only remain at 40 F or colder for a few minutes. As food temperatures approach room temperature, bacteria can thrive. Perishable foods should not be left at room temperature more than 2 hours.

3. Know which foods are likely to be sources of food-borne illness. Dishes with meat, meat juices, dairy, potatoes, corn and squash are especially prone to carry food-borne pathogens if not cooked thoroughly and held at a sufficient high temperature. These foods are "dense" and are difficult to heat to the center and also chill quickly when stored in large quantities. So, if there is any doubt as to whether the food is fresh or has been stored and reheated, be extra cautious. Keep in mind that populations especially vulnerable to illness include the elderly and young children.

4. Be aware of food-borne illnesses and symptoms. A worst-case scenario would be to eat food containing botulism spores that could lead to death. Most illnesses, however, are caused by *Clostridium perfringens*, often referred to as the "cafeteria germ" because it may be found in foods served in quantity and left for long periods of time on inadequately maintained steam tables or at room temperature. The toxins cause abdominal pain and stomach cramps, followed by diarrhea. These symptoms last around 24 hours, and while uncomfortable, they are rarely fatal.

*Listeria monocytogenes*, another food-borne illness, is caused when bacteria multiply slowly at refrigeration temperatures. To avoid serving foods containing *Listeria*, carefully follow "keep refrigerated" and "use by" directions, and thoroughly reheat frozen or refrigerated processed meat and poultry products before consumption. Symptoms include fever, muscle aches and sometimes nausea or diarrhea. If infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance or convulsions can occur.

5. Follow guidelines if you plan to take home leftovers. Divide cooked foods into shallow containers

to store in the refrigerator or freezer until serving. This encourages rapid, even cooling. Reheat hot foods to 165 F. Arrange and serve food on several small platters rather than on one large platter. Keep the rest of the food hot in the oven (set at 200-250 F) or cold in the refrigerator until serving time. This way foods will be held at a safe temperature for a longer period of time. Replace empty platters rather than adding fresh food to a dish that already had food in it. Many people's hands may have been taking food from the dish, which has also been sitting out at room temperature.

Short of avoiding buffets all together (which some food safety experts endorse), a little common sense and personal hand hygiene can help you avoid becoming sick from any number of communicable diseases. Carry and use hand sanitizer before eating. If you wash your hands in the restroom, use a paper towel to turn off faucets and to open the door as you leave.

By: Kathleen Riggs, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences professor, [kathleen.riggs@usu.edu](mailto:kathleen.riggs@usu.edu), 435-586-8132 What Next? Get useful tips like this as soon as we release them. Sign up here.