

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Focus on safety with prep for holiday meal

I host Thanksgiving dinner for extended family every year. I am never as organized as I hope to be and get totally stressed out. Now some older family members are battling serious health issues, and I'm especially concerned about making sure I do everything properly so no one gets sick. Any tips?

Actually, the fact that you recognize some people are more susceptible to foodborne illness indicates you are much more on top of things than you might think. Unfortunately, food safety issues during the holidays often take a back seat to other matters — like who will have to sit at the “kiddie table.”

Planning ahead is key to keeping yourself calm and collected during the Thanksgiving hustle and bustle, and to making sure food safety takes precedence. For example, consider these tips from Countdown to Thanksgiving on foodsafety.gov:

- A few weeks before Thanksgiving, start clearing the refrigerator to make sure you have plenty of room to thaw the turkey. A 16- to 20-pound turkey takes four to five days to thaw in the refrigerator, and it takes up a lot of space. So, don't wait until you bring the turkey home from the grocery store. Eat up those leftovers. Put that bottled water in the pantry to have space later.
- Make sure you have a meat thermometer that's easy to use and that you trust. Turkey needs to be cooked to 165 degrees F throughout. You need to test it at the innermost part of the thigh, the innermost part of the wing, and the thickest part of the breast. You can't do that with the pop-up thermometer that comes with the turkey.

Taking these issues seriously is important, especially for people with health problems such as



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diabetes and cancer, which weaken the immune system. That decreases their bodies' ability to fight off foodborne illness. Other at-risk populations are people 65 and older — even those who are otherwise healthy — pregnant women, and children under age 5. What might cause a mild gastrointestinal illness for someone else could send these people to the hospital. Why? Again, from foodsafety.gov:

- As people age, the gastrointestinal tract holds onto food longer and the stomach produces less acid, allowing bacteria more of a chance to grow and cause havoc. And, the liver and kidneys can have more trouble ridding the body of foreign bacteria and toxins as we age.
- Young children's stomachs also produce less acid, and their immune systems are still developing. That's why children under 5 have the highest incidence of many types of foodborne illness and are more at risk for serious complications. In addition, small bodies are more susceptible to dehydration from the diarrhea that often accompanies foodborne illness.

Given the potential for such consequences, planning ahead and taking food safety precautions makes sense. For more holiday guidance, see foodsafety.gov and search for “Thanksgiving.”

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By Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu

Editor: This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, food safety specialist for Ohio State University Extension.

Chow Line is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 364 W. Lane Ave., Suite B120, Columbus, OH 43201, or filipic.3@osu.edu.

College Marketing and Communications
364 W. Lane Ave., Suite B120
Columbus, OH 43201
614-292-2011

203 Research Services Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
330-263-3780

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