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Avoid foodborne illness during the holidays by safely handling and cooking food

DENVER-- Therese Pilonetti, unit manager for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Division of Environmental Health and Sustainability, Tuesday reminded Coloradans to keep their families safe from foodborne illness this holiday by providing proper food handling and preparation tips.

Pilonetti said, "The holidays are a wonderful opportunity to spend time with family, and food is typically a major part of the celebration. However, foodborne illness is the one unwelcome guest to avoid during the holidays." She provided the following safety tips for preventing foodborne illness.

Keep everything clean

- Wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling any food. Kids can sing "Happy Birthday" twice to gauge how long they should wash their hands.
- Wash food contact surfaces such as cutting boards, dishes, utensils and countertops with hot, soapy water after preparing each food item and before going on to the next item.
- Kitchen counters and cutting boards can be sanitized using a solution of one tablespoon of unscented chlorine bleach per gallon of water. Spray or wipe on surfaces and allow it to air dry.
- Rinse fruits and vegetables thoroughly under cool running water and scrub sturdy produce with a clean produce brush.
- There is no need to rinse raw meat and poultry before cooking. Washing these foods can spread bacteria to areas around the sink and countertops.

Avoid cross-contamination

Keep raw eggs, meat, poultry, seafood and their juices away from foods that won't be cooked. Take this precaution while shopping in the store, when storing in the refrigerator at home and while preparing meals.

- Consider using one cutting board only for foods that will be cooked (raw meat, poultry and seafood) and another one for those that will not (raw fruits and vegetables).

- Keep fruits and vegetables that will be eaten raw separate from other foods such as raw meat, poultry or seafood—and from kitchen utensils and surfaces used for those products until they have been thoroughly cleaned.
- Do not put cooked meat or other food that is ready to eat on an unwashed plate or surface that has held any raw eggs, meat, poultry, seafood or their juices.

Cook food to the appropriate internal temperature

- Use a food thermometer to make sure meat, poultry and fish are cooked to a safe internal temperature. Color is not a reliable indicator of doneness. To check a turkey for safety, insert a food thermometer into the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. The turkey is safe when the temperature reaches 165 F. If the turkey is stuffed, the temperature of the stuffing should be 165 F.
- Bring sauces, soups and gravies to a rolling boil when reheating.
- Cook eggs until the yolk and white are firm. When making your own eggnog or other recipe calling for raw eggs, use pasteurized shell eggs, liquid or frozen pasteurized egg products, or powdered egg whites.

Refrigerate foods quickly

- Do not leave foods containing meat, milk, eggs, fish or poultry out at room temperature. Refrigerate leftovers and takeout foods—and *any* type of food that should be refrigerated—within two hours. This includes casseroles and pumpkin or other custard pies popular during the holidays.
- Never defrost food at room temperature. Food can be defrosted safely in the refrigerator, under cold running water or in the microwave. Food thawed in cold water or in the microwave should be cooked immediately.
- Allow the correct amount of time to properly thaw food. A 20-pound turkey needs four to five days to thaw completely when thawed in the refrigerator.
- Don't taste food that looks or smells questionable. A good rule to follow is, "When in doubt, throw it out."
- Leftovers should be used within three to four days.

Handle and prepare food for others only if you are healthy

- Don't handle or prepare food for others if you are sick, especially if experiencing vomiting, diarrhea or flu-like symptoms. The bacteria and viruses that cause these types of symptoms easily can be transmitted to food and anyone who ends up eating it.
- Use special care when preparing food for anyone considered at high risk for foodborne illness (older adults, infants and young children; pregnant women; and people with a chronic illness or any other condition that weakens their immune system).

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