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Release: Spring Holidays are a Treat, Don't Let Bacteria Ruin Your Feast

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**Spring Holidays are a Treat, Don't Let Bacteria Ruin Your Feast**

**WASHINGTON, March 12, 2024** — It’s a special time of year, where friends and family from coast to coast will gather for a rare occurrence: the three major holidays of Easter, Eid, and Passover all falling within the spring season. People who observe these faiths will gather with friends and family to enjoy traditional meals.

“The holiday season is a special time to gather with friends and family and enjoy traditional meals,” said USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Emilio Esteban. “Whether you’re celebrating your Easter dinner with ham, Eid lunch with lamb, or Seder meal with brisket, remember to keep food safety at the forefront.”

These holiday meals often have cultural significance and may require foods to be prepared early, so that religious obligations are completed prior to gathering and enjoying the meals. This provides an extended opportunity for foodborne illness to ruin major holiday dishes. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) wants to keep your celebrations going with some tips on how not to be at risk for foodborne illness.

Here are six pieces of advice from the USDA to keep your holiday meals safe:

**#1 Keep Hands Clean Before, During, and After Food Prep**

Handwashing is the first step to avoiding foodborne illness. In a [recent USDA study](https://www.fsis.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media_file/documents/Breakfast_Study_Report_8_3_23.pdf), 96% of handwashing attempts failed due to not including [all the necessary steps](https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/cleanliness-helps-prevent). Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water before and after handling food and when switching between ingredients.

**#2 Prevent Cross-Contamination of Surfaces and Foods**

Cross-contamination is the spread of bacteria from raw meat and poultry onto ready-to-eat food, surfaces, and utensils. Avoid this by using separate cutting boards — one for raw meat and poultry, and another for ready-to-eat foods such as fruits and vegetables. Clean and sanitize any areas where meat and poultry have touched before and after cooking. Cleaning with soap and water physically removes the germs, and sanitizing kills any that may remain. Many different sanitizers can be used: an easy homemade version is to make a solution of 1 tablespoon of liquid chlorine bleach per gallon of water, or you can use a commercial sanitizer or sanitizing wipe.

**#3 Thaw Meat and Poultry Safely**

Leaving any frozen package of meat or poultry for more than two hours on the counter at room temperature is dangerous. Even though the center of the package may still be frozen, the outer layer of the food is in the “[Danger Zone](https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/danger-zone-40f-140f)” between 40 and 140 F — a temperature where foodborne bacteria multiply rapidly and cause foodborne illness. Plan for [refrigerator, cold water, or microwave thawing](https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/big-thaw-safe-defrosting-methods#:~:text=When%20thawing%20frozen%20food%2C%20it%27s%20best%20to%20plan,safe%20to%20cook%20foods%20from%20the%20frozen%20state.) instead.

**#4 Cook to a Safe Internal Temperature**

Color is never a reliable indicator of safety and doneness. Use a food thermometer to ensure the following safe internal temperatures:

* Cook fish to 145 F.
* Cook beef, pork, lamb and veal steaks, chops and roasts to 145 F. For safety and quality, allow meat to rest for at least three minutes before carving or consuming.
* Ham, fresh or smoked (uncooked): 145 F
* Cook ground meats, including beef, pork, lamb and veal to 160 F.
* Cook egg dishes to 160 F.
* Cook poultry (whole or ground) to 165 F.

When reheating already cooked meat, poultry or egg items that have cooled, they should be reheated to at least 165 °F. USDA [recommends reheating](https://ask.usda.gov/s/article/What-methods-of-reheating-food-are-safe) cooked meat, poultry or egg products on the stove top, in the oven, or in a microwave.

**#5 Keep Hot Foods Hot, and Cold Foods Cold**

Food should not be left in the Danger Zone for more than two hours (called the two-hour rule). After two hours, bacteria can reach dangerous levels that can cause foodborne illness. Perishable foods, such as kebabs or brisket, should be discarded if left out for longer than two hours.

To prevent food waste, refrigerate or freeze perishable items within two hours, or keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Keep cold foods at a temperature of 40 F or below by keeping food nestled in ice or refrigerated until ready to serve. Keep hot foods at a temperature of 140 F or above by placing food in a preheated oven, warming trays, chafing dishes or slow cookers.

**#6 Use or Freeze Leftovers within Four Days**

Leftovers (including appetizers, side dishes and main courses) should be stored within two hours of cooking. Divide leftovers into smaller portions and refrigerate or freeze them in shallow containers, which helps leftovers cool quicker than storing them in large quantities. Place leftovers into airtight containers to help keep bacteria out and retain moisture.

Leftovers can be kept in the refrigerator for three to four days or frozen for three to four months. Although safe indefinitely, frozen leftovers can lose moisture and flavor when stored for longer times in the freezer.

If you have food safety questions, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854), email [MPHotline@usda.gov](mailto:MPHotline@usda.gov) or chat live at [www.ask.usda.gov](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fask.usda.gov%2Fs%2F&data=04%7C01%7C%7C5e261632ab2d4d4af52608d9e28668a9%7Ced5b36e701ee4ebc867ee03cfa0d4697%7C0%7C0%7C637789889172321557%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=z8opm%2Bu4zcovV8zRYnb2bPv5OY90bFAWEx5scPtQMqQ%3D&reserved=0) from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.

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USDA touches the lives of all Americans each day in so many positive ways. In the Biden-Harris Administration, USDA is transforming America’s food system with a greater focus on more resilient local and regional food production, fairer markets for all producers, ensuring access to safe, healthy and nutritious food in all communities, building new markets and streams of income for farmers and producers using climate smart food and forestry practices, making historic investments in infrastructure and clean energy capabilities in rural America, and committing to equity across the Department by removing systemic barriers and building a workforce more representative of America. To learn more, visit [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov).

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