

Holiday Meat Safety Tips



Turkey

Thaw turkey in the refrigerator, or in a leak-proof plastic bag in a sink of cold water that is changed every 30 minutes. Once thawed, do not wash the turkey. Doing so spreads bacteria around the sink.

If you plan to stuff your turkey, do so just before cooking. To make sure the turkey and stuffing have reached a safe internal temperature of 165°F, check by inserting a food thermometer into the center of the stuffing and into the thickest portions of the breast, thigh and wing joint.

Beef & Lamb

The popular holiday beef and lamb recipes will frequently call for marinating, sometimes for a few days. In these cases it's critical that the meat be kept chilled in the refrigerator for the entire time. Properly refrigerated, you can safely marinate meat for up to 5 days.

Use a meat thermometer or instant read thermometer to make sure meats are cooked to the appropriate degree of doneness. Roast beef, grilled steaks and lamb chops should be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 145°F.

Note that the minimum cooking temperature for ground meats is higher than that for whole retail cuts like steaks and chops. Ground meats should be cooked to at least 160°F.

Ham: Cooked or Fresh?

When purchasing a ham, think about whether you want a ready-to-eat ham or a fresh, uncooked ham. Uncooked hams must be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 160°F.

Ready-to-eat hams, including spiral-cut hams and fully cooked, unsliced hams, can be served cold or heated up. But if you do decide to reheat a pre-cooked ham, make sure that it reaches an internal temperature of 140°F in no less than two hours.

That means heating it in a 325°F or hotter oven. Why? Slow cooking at low temperatures can encourage the growth of bacteria, so if your oven isn't warm enough, even a pre-cooked ham could become a breeding ground for dangerous bacteria.

Passover Seders

The traditional Passover meal can be tricky from a food safety standpoint because the entire meal must be prepared in advance. Beef brisket, a popular Passover dish, must be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 145°F.

After cooking, the brisket can be cooled, sliced and then transferred to serving platters and refrigerated. Right before the meal begins, the platters of brisket can be served straight out of the refrigerator. If you're serving the brisket hot, however, take care to reheat it thoroughly, which means to no less than 165°F, right before you serve it.

What About Leftovers?

Perishable food items should not be left out at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Leftovers should be stored in shallow containers and refrigerated or frozen immediately. Any leftovers not eaten or frozen within 3 days should be discarded.

And remember, when reheating leftovers, the magic number is 165°F. Follow these guidelines and your holiday celebrations will be memorable — for all the right reasons!