

Debunking holiday food safety myths

By Jordan Machado

The holidays are a time for joy, connection, and of course delicious meals. While celebrating, it's important to keep food safety in mind. Unfortunately, many misconceptions about food safety can lead to foodborne illnesses during the holiday season. Here are some common myths debunked to help keep your celebrations safe and healthy.

Myth 1: Undercooked eggs are safe for everyone to eat.

Many recipes call for undercooked eggs, like in eggnog, mousse or custard pies. While these treats are a holiday favorite, they can be risky for young children, the elderly, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems. Undercooked eggs can harbor harmful bacteria like Salmonella, leading to serious foodborne illness. To reduce the risk, consider using pasteurized eggs or avoid raw egg-based recipes altogether.

Myth 2: It's okay to eat raw cookie dough or batter.

Many people know that raw, unpasteurized eggs in cookie dough or batter can make you sick, but did you know that raw flour can also pose a risk? Flour can carry harmful bacteria such as Salmonella and E. coli, which can lead to serious foodborne illnesses. Even if your dough doesn't contain eggs or you use pasteurized eggs, it's still unsafe to eat raw. To stay safe, it's best to save your taste-testing for when the cookies are fully baked.

Myth 3: Washing poultry before cooking removes harmful bacteria.

Many believe rinsing poultry before cooking can remove harmful bacteria like Salmonella or Campylobacter. Washing raw poultry increases the risk of cross-contamination, spreading bacteria to your sink, countertops, utensils and other foods in your kitchen. The best way to kill harmful bacteria is by cooking poultry to 165°F to ensure it's safe to eat.

Myth 4: You can thaw turkey on the countertop as long as you thoroughly cook it later.

Thawing turkey on the countertop is risky. The outer layers warm up much faster than the inside, allowing harmful bacteria to grow on the surface. Thorough cooking may not destroy the toxins these bacteria produce. Instead of thawing on the countertop, use one of these safe methods:

- **Refrigerator thawing:** Allow 24 hours for every 4-5 pounds, keeping the turkey below 41°F throughout the process.
- **Cold water thawing:** Submerge the turkey in cold water, changing the water every 30 minutes. Allow about 30 minutes per pound and ensure it's in a leak-proof bag to avoid cross-contamination.

- **Microwave thawing:** Use your microwave's defrost setting and cook the turkey immediately after thawing.

Myth 5: It's safe to cook stuffing inside of the turkey.

While cooking stuffing inside the turkey may seem convenient, it's not the safest method. Stuffing should be cooked separately to ensure both the turkey and stuffing reach the proper temperatures. Even if the turkey reaches the correct internal temperature, the stuffing, especially in the center, may not cook thoroughly. If you prefer the turkey-stuffed tradition, use a thermometer to ensure both the turkey and stuffing reach 165°F.

Myth 6: Leftovers can be safely stored in the refrigerator for a week or more.

Leftovers are a holiday favorite, but they don't last forever. Harmful bacteria can grow without affecting the leftovers' appearance, smell or taste, making it easy to overlook the risk. To keep leftovers safe, store them in shallow, airtight containers and refrigerate within two hours of serving. Perishable foods should be eaten within 3-4 days, or frozen for longer storage. When reheating, ensure leftovers reach 165°F to eliminate any lingering bacteria.

Myth 7: Foodborne illness is nothing more than an upset stomach.

Anyone who has ever experienced foodborne illness knows just how miserable it can be. It's not just an upset stomach—it's hours, sometimes days, of nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever and stomach cramps that can quickly derail holiday plans and leave you bedridden. For some, foodborne illness can be even more serious and can quickly turn into a dangerous health crisis, leading to hospitalization or even death.

This holiday season, prioritize food safety so you can focus on what truly matters—spending time with loved ones.

Jordan Machado is a registered sanitarian at RiverStone Health Environmental Health Services. To contact her, call 406-256-2770.