



Hotline Answers “Panic Button” Food Safety Questions

“Help! I’m having 20 people over for dinner and I think I cooked the meat unsafely!” The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline receives similar calls every day about the safety of food. During the holidays, people are busy and sometimes forget that unsafe handling and cooking can lead to foodborne illness.

Here are some questions callers have asked regarding the safety of their holiday foods.

Q. “I just discovered I cooked the turkey with the package of giblets still inside the cavity. Are the turkey and giblets safe to eat?”

A. If giblets were left in the cavity during roasting, even though this is not recommended, the turkey and giblets are probably safe to use. However, if the packaging containing the giblets has changed shape or melted in any way during cooking, do not use the giblets or the turkey because harmful chemicals from the packaging may have penetrated the surrounding meat.

Q. “This morning, I discovered the pork roast was left out all night. I took it out of the freezer to thaw for awhile last night and forgot to put it back in the fridge before I went to bed. The roast is completely thawed and warm to the touch. If I cook it, will it be safe?”

A. Unfortunately, this roast should not be eaten. It has been out of refrigeration too long. Refrigerate perishables, prepared foods, and leftovers within 2 hours (1 hour if the temperature is above 90 °F). At room temperature, bacteria that may be present in raw meat and poultry multiply very rapidly and some types of bacteria will produce toxins which are not destroyed by cooking and can possibly cause illness. Never thaw frozen meat or poultry on the kitchen counter. Refrigerator thawing is much safer. You may also thaw foods in cold water or in the microwave. These foods must be cooked immediately to a safe minimum internal temperature before refrigerating.

Q. “I received a gift of a smoked pheasant from a mail order company. It was packed in a box with no dry ice or frozen gel packs. It wasn’t cold even though the label said “keep refrigerated.” Because it is smoked, will that make it safe?”

A. Poultry and hams are smoked for “flavor,” not preservation. The only exceptions are country hams and dry sausages which are safe at room temperature

because of their high salt content and dryness. If a product is labeled “keep refrigerated,” that’s a warning that it must be kept cold to be safe. Don’t eat the product. If perishable food arrives warm — above 40 °F as measured with a food thermometer — notify the company. It’s the shipper’s responsibility to deliver the product on time, properly packaged and handled safely; the customer’s responsibility is to have someone at home to receive it and refrigerate it immediately.

Q. “I purchased a fresh stuffed turkey from my local grocery store in the deli department. One of my houseguests said it’s not safe to cook and eat it. Is she right?”

A. Your houseguest must be well-informed on food safety. She’s right: DO NOT USE IT! We recommend discarding or returning the product to the store where purchased.

USDA recommends only buying frozen pre-stuffed turkeys that display the USDA or State mark of inspection on the packaging. These turkeys are safe because they have been processed under controlled conditions. DO NOT THAW before cooking. Cook from the frozen state. Follow package directions for safe handling and cooking.

Q. “The instructions on the ham said it would take about 4 hours to cook, but the thermometer read 160 °F after 3 hours. The problem is that we won’t be eating for another 2 hours. Can I leave it out on the counter covered with foil?”

A. That’s not a good idea. Bacteria that cause foodborne illness can contaminate safely cooked food left out at room temperature. Scientists have found that after 2 hours at room temperature, bacteria can multiply on foods to high enough levels to cause illness. Since the ham will be out extra time for carving and serving, it’s better to cover it and keep it in a 200 °F oven until you’re ready to serve it. Check the ham with a food thermometer to make sure it doesn’t go below an internal temperature of 140 °F while it’s in the oven.

Q. "What should I do? I put a 20 lb turkey in a 200 °F oven before I went to bed last night, and the pop-up timer says it's already done at 7:30 this morning. We won't be eating until 3 p.m."

A. You have two problems here. First, overnight cooking of meat at a low temperature isn't a safe method so we don't recommend eating this turkey. It's not safe to cook any meat or poultry in an oven set lower than 325 °F. At 200 °F, meat remains in the "Danger Zone" too long (between 40 and 140 °F) where bacteria multiply rapidly and can form toxins.

Secondly, holding a safely cooked turkey at a safe internal temperature of 140 °F or above for this amount of time can dry it out and affect the quality. If a safely cooked turkey must be held from 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., for optimal safety and quality it should be carved and refrigerated in covered shallow containers and served cold or reheated to an internal temperature of 165 °F. Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature.

Q. "My aunt has a holiday party every year. It lasts all afternoon and into the evening. She leaves food sitting out on the table for hours. I have small children and am concerned that they could get sick if they eat it. What should I do?"

A. You're right to be concerned about your children. They, as well as pregnant women, older adults, and persons with a weakened immune system stand a greater chance of getting sick from food poisoning and suffering complications. Everyone should avoid eating perishable foods which are not either kept cold or hot. Hopefully your aunt will keep hot foods hot (140 °F or warmer) in a chafing dish, slow cooker or warming trays. Cold foods should be held at 40 °F or colder, nestled in bowls of ice or replaced often from the refrigerator. You can offer your child these with confidence.

Q. "I baked some pumpkin pies over the weekend to serve tomorrow on Thanksgiving. They've just been sitting on the counter. Should I have refrigerated them?"

A. Yes. Foods made with eggs and milk, such as pumpkin pie, custard pie and cheesecake, must first be safely baked to a safe minimum internal temperature of 160 °F. Then, they must be refrigerated after baking. Eggs and milk have high protein and moisture content and when these baked products are left at room temperature, conditions are ripe for bacteria to multiply. It's not necessary to refrigerate most other cakes, cookies or breads unless they have a perishable filling or frosting.

Q. "I roasted my holiday turkey yesterday and put it in the refrigerator. It isn't stuffed so I thought it was safe. Then my daughter said I shouldn't have refrigerated it whole. Is it safe to eat today?"

A. We do not recommend you refrigerate a cooked turkey whole — it could take too long to cool down to a safe temperature. For optimal safety, cut whole or large pieces of poultry into small pieces. It's okay to leave the drumsticks, thighs and wings intact, if you prefer. Refrigerate in covered shallow containers within 2 hours of cooking. This is very important to ensure rapid, even cooling and quick reheating.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**; TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The Hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7



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