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Keeping Potluck Meals Safe

Food borne Illnesses are most commonly caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites. These microorganisms can be present in or on food, but can't be seen, smelled or tasted.

Perishable foods are those that require refrigeration. They include foods containing meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, eggs, or milk products. Also included are foods labeled "keep refrigerated."

Keeping food safe, particularly food prepared at home and brought to another location, is very important in reducing the risk of a foodborne illness outbreak. Many cases of foodborne illness start in home kitchens, not because of the food, but the way it is prepared.

Flu-like symptoms such as, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, cramps, fever, headache, and muscle pain may not be the flu, but a foodborne illness. For the very old, very young, pregnant women, and those who have a chronic illness, a foodborne illness may be life threatening.

Why is there a potential problem with potluck or dish-to-pass meals?

Many times individuals preparing food at home are not aware of food safety practices. Some factors that may contribute to a foodborne illness include:

- leaving perishable foods at room temperature too long, cooking large amounts of food ahead of time and cooling it improperly.
- failing to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold, or the person preparing the food may be ill.
- Other factors to consider are: How was the dish prepared prior to the event? Were safe practices adhered to during preparation?

What can I bring to a potluck or dish-to-pass to reduce the risks associated with foodborne illness?

- Some things to think about when deciding what to bring:
- Is the item perishable, will you be able to keep it hot or cold until it is served?
 - Will you be able to heat the food or keep it cold or hot until it is served?
 - Will there be refrigeration or coolers with ice at the event so foods can be kept cold?

If you won't be able to keep cold foods cold or hot foods hot, consider bringing foods that need no refrigeration. Suggestions include bread, dry baked goods, chips, pretzels, or whole fruit.

How can I make sure the food I bring to a potluck or dish-to-pass event is safe?

CLEAN: Wash hands, utensils, and surfaces with hot soapy water before and after food preparation. Using bleach diluted in water as a disinfectant before and after use can provide added protection against foodborne illnesses.

SEPARATE: Never place ready-to eat foods on an unwashed plate or work surface that previously held raw meat, poultry, eggs, or seafood. Never mix old food with fresh cooked food.

COOK: Cook food to proper internal temperatures. Temperatures vary for different types of meats, poultry, eggs, and seafood.

CHILL: Refrigerate or freeze perishables, prepared food and leftovers within two hours. Make sure the refrigerator is set no higher than 40°F and that the freezer is set at 0°F. One way to be sure foods are at 45°F or below is to use a metal stem probe thermometer scaled from 0°F to 220°F.

Suggestions for Keeping Potluck and Dish-to-pass Meals Safe

When you shop buy cold foods last, get home fast.

- When you shop take food home and immediately place it in the refrigerator.
- Don't buy anything you won't use before the use by date.
- Don't buy food in poor condition.

When you store food, keep it safe in the refrigerator.

- To keep bacteria in check, your refrigerator should run at 40° F or below.
- Use fresh meat, poultry, eggs, or fish within a few days or freeze immediately.
- Place raw meats, poultry, eggs, and fish packages so their juices won't drip on ready-to eat foods.

When you prepare food, keep everything clean.

- Wash hands in hot soapy water for at least 20 seconds before preparing food and after using the bathroom, sneezing or coughing, changing diapers, or handling pets.
- Wash hands, cutting boards, and utensils in hot soapy water after cutting raw meat, poultry, or fish, or handling raw eggs before handling ready-to eat foods.
- Always thaw frozen food in your refrigerator.

When cooking, cook thoroughly. (use a probe thermometer scaled from 0-220°F to check final cooking temperatures)

- Cook poultry and meats containing stuffing to an internal temperature of 165°F.
- Cook pork to at least 150°F.
- Cook rare roast beef to at least 130°F.
- Cook fresh shell eggs or foods containing eggs to at least 145°F. (don't use recipes in which raw eggs remain raw or partially cooked)
- Cook ground beef to 158°F.
- When you cook ahead, divide large portions of food into small, shallow containers for quick cooling.

Four Simple Food Safety Rules to Remember:

- Keep hot foods hot, above 140°F.

When you are transporting food, keep it safe.

- Use ice or cold packs to keep cold foods at or below 45°F.
- A thoroughly cooked casserole straight from the oven, will stay hot for a short trip if well insulated. Try several layers of aluminum wrap followed by layers of newspaper and finally wrapped in a bath towel.
- Serve the casserole as soon as you arrive or place it in a pre-heated oven until ready to serve.

When you serve the food, never leave it out more than 2 hours.

- Use clean utensils to serve food.
- Never leave perishable food out of the refrigerator more than 2 hours.
- Keep food in the refrigeration or on ice until served.
- Use a warming unit to keep hot foods hot (above 140°F)

What to do with leftovers.

- Any left over perishable foods should be thrown out.
- Keep cold foods cold, below 45°F.
- Keep hands, utensils, and work surfaces clean.
- Never leave perishable food out of the refrigerator more than 2 hours.

Contact the Tompkins County Health Department Food Service Program for additional information.
(607) 274-6688