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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 21, 2011

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Put Food Safety First When Preparing Your Holiday Meal

Sacramento, CA – The holidays are a busy time for most people and thinking about food safety may not be high on your list of concerns. But unsafe cooking and handling of leftovers can make you sick. Sacramento County Environmental Management Department's (EMD) food safety specialists and Sacramento County Public Health are teaming up to remind you that foodborne illness can be prevented with good personal hygiene and safe food practices at home.

Environmental Health Chief John Rogers notes that while foodborne disease outbreaks are not common, people at risk – the elderly, children, and individuals with weakened immune systems, including pregnant women – can become very ill. “Frequent hand-washing is the most important safety tip for all of us to remember as we prepare and enjoy holiday feasts with family and friends,” said Rogers.

Follow these food safety tips when preparing turkey and handling leftovers

Safe Thawing

Thawing turkeys must be kept at a safe temperature. The "danger zone" is between 41 and 135°F — the temperature range where foodborne bacteria multiply rapidly. While frozen, a turkey is safe indefinitely, but as soon as it begins to thaw, bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again, if it is in the "danger zone." There are three safe ways to thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in a microwave oven.

Safe Preparation

Bacteria present on raw poultry can contaminate your hands, utensils, and work surfaces as you prepare the turkey. If these areas are not cleaned thoroughly before working with other foods, bacteria from the raw poultry can then be transferred to other foods. After working with raw poultry, always wash your hands, utensils, and work surfaces before they touch other foods. Remember to use soap and warm water and wash your hands for at least 20 seconds.

Safe Stuffing

For optimal safety and uniform doneness, cook the stuffing outside the turkey in a casserole dish. However, if you place stuffing inside the turkey, do so just before cooking, and use a food thermometer. Make sure the center of the stuffing reaches a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F. Bacteria can survive in stuffing that has not reached 165°F, possibly resulting in foodborne illness.

Safe Cooking

Set the oven temperature no lower than 325°F and be sure the turkey is completely thawed. Place turkey breast-side up on a flat wire rack in a shallow roasting pan 2 to 2-1/2 inches deep. Check the internal temperature at the center of the stuffing and meaty portion of the breast, thigh, and wing joint using a food thermometer. Cooking times will vary. The food thermometer must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F. Let the turkey stand 20 minutes before removing all stuffing from the cavity and carving the meat.

Handling Leftovers

Perishable foods should not be left out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours. For optimum results, remove turkey meat from the bone and promptly refrigerate or freeze leftovers in shallow containers. It IS safe to freeze leftover turkey and trimmings — even if you purchased them frozen. Wrap tightly for best quality.

Refrigerator (41 °F or below)

Cooked turkey 3 to 4 days

Cooked dishes and gravy 3 to 4 days

To find out how to freeze food safely and how long to keep it, visit the USDA website at www.fsis.usda.gov/Fact_Sheets/Focus_On_Freezing/index.asp#1.

Reheating a Whole Turkey is NOT Recommended. If you plan to reheat a turkey, cut the meat into smaller pieces. Slice breast meat. Legs and wings may be left whole. Refrigerate in shallow containers. Exception: Cooked turkeys with the USDA inspection seal on the packaging have been processed under controlled conditions. Follow package directions for reheating and storing.

Visit m.ffi.saccounty.net with your smart phone or tablet and view inspection results for food facilities in your immediate area! Visit EMD's new [mobile web & app page](#) for more information.

Visit the Sacramento County Environmental Management Department website at www.emd.saccounty.net or call (916) 875-8440.

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