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STRAIGHT TALK FROM TDA



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Food-poisoning bacteria shouldn't be a fact of life in your kitchen, but unfortunately they are. One common type, salmonella, lives in the gut of almost all animals and can get into poultry, meat, or other foods by several different routes. Contaminated food may cause food poisoning, an unpleasant and sometimes serious problem.

Most people who get sick from salmonella suffer flu-like symptoms--fever, vomiting and diarrhea--for two to seven days. Because of their more delicate systems, children, old people, and sick people are especially hard-hit by food-poisoning symptoms.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, turkey and chicken are the meats most often contaminated with salmonella. USDA says the main cause is lack of cleanliness in mass-production methods using old, hard-to-adjust machinery. Right now, when millions of turkeys are being slaughtered and processed in a short time to accommodate Thanksgiving and Christmas demand, there's increased risk of salmonella contamination.

So as you plan traditional holiday meals, take a minute to remind yourself of the safe kitchen practices that will keep salmonella food poisoning away from your dinner table.

Keep It Clean. Start by handling raw poultry carefully, regardless of whether it's fresh or frozen. You can't see or smell salmonella bacteria, but they spread quickly to anything that touches contaminated food. So don't take any chances. Prevent cross-contamination by immediately washing--with soap and water--any cutting board, knife, sink, dish towel, bowl or countertop you use to prepare the bird. Don't forget to wash your hands, too, **before** you go to work on the cole slaw or cranberry sauce.

The Big Chill. Since food-poisoning bacteria multiply rapidly at room temperature, it's safest not to thaw your turkey on the kitchen counter. Left at room temperature, a frozen turkey will thaw from the outside in. As the surface warms, bacteria there multiply, and by

the time the whole bird thaws, the bacteria could reach dangerous levels. USDA recommends that you not leave even cooked meat at room temperature for more than two hours.

So plan ahead, and leave time to thaw the bird in the refrigerator or in cold water. Refrigerator thawing takes one or two days for an 8 to 12-pound turkey and four to five days for big birds weighing 20 to 24 pounds.

Cold-water thawing takes four to six hours for an 8 to 12-pound turkey and 11 to 12 hours for a 20 to 24-pounder. The National Turkey Federation recommends keeping the turkey in its unopened bag and changing the cold water every half hour for safe, effective thawing. Turkey can also be thawed safely in a microwave oven. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.

The Heat's On. Thorough cooking is the only way to destroy salmonella in food. For poultry, that means the bird has to reach a uniform internal temperature of 180 to 185 degrees before it's safe to eat. Stuffing temperatures should reach at least 165 degrees. A meat thermometer is the most reliable way to check these temperatures.

Consumer advocates recently tried to get USDA to require salmonella-warning labels on all poultry, along with information about proper handling and cooking. So far, USDA has declined to adopt this proposal. So until processors improve their plants, the burden of guarding against the threat of salmonella falls on the consumer.

USDA operates a Meat and Poultry Hotline weekdays from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. (CST) to answer questions or handle complaints about the safety, wholesomeness or labeling of meat and poultry products. Their toll-free number is 1-800-535-4555.

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