

Daily Union Article  
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Keep Easter Meals Safe

I am sure that many reading this article are well versed in safe food handling practices. However, it seems that every holiday where family and friends gather, the risk of handling food unsafely rises with so many cooks in the kitchen. For those who “know their stuff” – this article will be a refresher. For those who are new to hosting family and friends for a large meal, please read attentively. Finally, if you don’t think you need the food safety primer, skip to the end of the article where I share cooking tips for hard-boiled eggs and Easter egg safety.

Our food safety friends at FightBac.org remind us that it is important to plan ahead. Make sure you have a clean kitchen to start your holiday preparations. Take inventory to ensure that you have shallow containers to store perishables in the refrigerator after the big meal. Make sure there is enough storage space in the refrigerator and freezer. I find that cleaning out my refrigerator is a great “first step” in preparing for company. The refrigerator space needs to be open enough for good air circulation which will help keep the temperature at 40°F.

As you prepare food in the kitchen, make sure that anyone who helps you knows the basic food safety rules – clean, separate, cook and chill. If they have long hair, require that they pull their hair back or put it up in a baseball cap. Remind them to wash their hands and wrists thoroughly (20 seconds with warm water and soap), as well. Because sponges and kitchen towels can easily soak up and harbor bacteria in a crowded kitchen, it can be safer to use paper towels.

When the meal is over, refrigerate or freeze leftovers in shallow containers within 2 hours of the food being placed out for serving. Wrap or cover the food and place in a refrigerator for no more than 3-4 days. Leftovers should be heated to 165°F prior to consumption. If you don’t think you will be able to eat the leftovers within that time, put them in a freezer container, label the contents and include the date it was packaged.

Frozen storage times are much longer, but some foods such as salads made with mayonnaise do not freeze well. Food kept frozen longer than recommended storage times are safe to eat, but may be drier and their taste is compromised.

As part of your weekend celebrations, perhaps you are planning to hard-boil eggs. The American Egg Board suggests the following steps for perfect hard-boiled eggs every time:

- 1) Place eggs in saucepan large enough to hold them in a single layer. ADD cold water to cover eggs by 1 inch. HEAT over high heat just to boiling.
- 2) Remove from burner. COVER pan. Let eggs stand in hot water about 12 minutes for large eggs (9 minutes for medium eggs; 15 minutes for extra large eggs.)
- 3) DRAIN immediately and serve warm. OR, cool completely under cold running water or in a bowl of ice water, then REFRIGERATE.

Why be so careful with the amount of time you leave them in the hot water? You want to make sure they are cooked thoroughly. Fresh eggs, even those with no cracks and clean shells may contain bacteria called Salmonella that can cause foodborne illness (or food poisoning.) Following safe handling and cooking practices help protect you from this danger. The safe food handling practices outlined at the beginning of this article hold true for how you would handle eggs.

It is important that even our Easter eggs are handled appropriately. Here are some important safe handling methods to remember this time of year from the Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Poultry & Egg Division. When you're decorating, cooking or hiding Easter eggs, extra care is needed as eggs are handled a great deal more than usual around Easter. Remember to:

- Wash your hands thoroughly with hot soapy water and rinse them before handling the eggs when cooking, cooling, dyeing and hiding them.
- Be sure and inspect the eggs before purchasing them, making sure they are not dirty or cracked. Dangerous bacteria may enter a cracked egg.
- Store eggs in their original cartons in the refrigerator rather than the refrigerator door.
- If you're having an Easter egg hunt, consider hiding places carefully. Avoid areas where the eggs might come into contact with pets, wild animals, birds, reptiles, insects or lawn chemicals.
- Make sure you find all the eggs you've hidden and then refrigerate them. Discard cracked eggs.
- As long as the eggs are NOT out of refrigeration over two hours, they will be safe to eat. Do not eat eggs that have been out of refrigeration more than two hours. Refrigerate hard-cooked eggs in their shells and use them within 1 week. If you are planning to use colored eggs as decorations, (for centerpieces, etc.) where the eggs will be out of refrigeration for many hours or several days, discard them after they have served their decorative purpose.

Gatherings with family and friends for holidays such as Easter are a great way to keep our relationships close. You don't want to put a damper on the fun by mishandling the food you prepare and share. Take extra care so that everyone enjoys the day and days to come by following these four basic steps. Wash hands and surfaces often. Separate

raw meats from other foods. Cook to the right temperature. Finally, refrigerate foods promptly.

For more information about safe food handling practices, contact me at the Geary County Extension office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!