

Daily Union Article  
Saturday, December 23, 2017  
Title: Safe Holiday Leftovers

You've spent hours, if not days preparing for your family Christmas meal. Everyone converges at the table, partakes of the feast of roast beast and fancy side dishes, graze through the desserts multiple times and now pile in to couches, bean bags, and easy chairs. What an amazing conclusion to a wonderful meal shared with those you love. But has it really come to a "conclusion?" The answer is "No!" Read on to find out what the **real** conclusion should be.

As you scan the remains left from the meal, you realize there is still food left over! Not just a little, either! Many of us look forward to the leftovers as much as we do to the holiday meals. Whether we plan to use them for packing next week's lunches or in stretching them to use in a casserole or soup, safe use of leftovers is the only budget-friendly and environmentally conscientious choice you have.

The key is to make sure you store the leftovers correctly to prevent foodborne illness. What steps should you take to keep your family safe and prevent someone from getting sick?

Most importantly, remember that you have two hours from the time you take the food from its heat source (an oven, for example) or from its cold storage (the refrigerator) to get the food put away in safe storage. The Food and Nutrition experts with USDA emphasize this two-hour rule in every bulletin they put out about safe perishable food storage. If the food is being prepared fresh and put directly on the table, then you have only two hours from the first preparation step to put it away for safe storage.

Leftover foods may look good and smell okay, but the bacteria that cause foodborne illness can still be in the food in a large enough quantities to make you sick. If you are unsure of how long it has been at room temperature, it is better to toss it out than to consume it. The old adage "When in doubt, throw it out!" – applies here.

Don't forget to use the leftovers in good time. If you are storing them in your refrigerator, double check the interior temperature to ensure it rests at 41 degrees Fahrenheit or colder. Cooked meat and poultry should be used within three to four days. Gravy and meat broth has a shorter refrigerator shelf life – two days maximum. When you reheat the food, use a meat thermometer to check the internal temperature before you serve it. Foods need reheated to no less than 165 degrees Fahrenheit. Gravy and broth need reheated to boiling. When using a microwave to reheat, make sure you use a microwave safe dish to warm it up in. You also need to turn the dish and stir the food to make sure it is hot throughout the food and not just around the edges.

When you combine leftovers into casseroles or if you are reheating cooked vegetables, be sure to use them within two to three days. Again, the 165 degree Fahrenheit rule applies for the minimum temperature when you warm them up.

If you are unable to use the leftovers within the recommended days of storage, you can freeze most foods. Sometimes you may notice a change in texture, but if you put the food in the freezer while it is still safe (meaning you didn't leave it in the refrigerator past the recommended number of days), it will be safe when you take it out.

Freezing leftovers requires a bit of advance planning. Is there enough space in your freezer? Do I have the right type of storage to freeze the food in? Do I have a way to label and date the freezer package? Use single serve packages to freeze your leftovers in. This will make sure they freeze quickly and more evenly. You should label all freezer packages with both the contents and the date it was placed in the freezer. Meat and poultry can be safely frozen for three to four months and maintain it's original quality. You can safely keep it in the freezer longer than that but you are more likely to notice that the quality deteriorates.

What are your best leftover foods to put in the freezer? Meat, poultry and meat dishes including ham, may have a slight change in texture but still handle freezing very well. Casseroles also freeze well. Cooked vegetables will have a change texture, but can still be an excellent ingredient to add to soups and casseroles. The icing on cakes will noticeably change but the cake flavor and texture will stay intact if used within 2 – 3 months. Fruit pies and pecan pies freeze fairly well, but custard pies do not. Leftover cookies freeze great but package them in small amounts so that you have a ready-made treat for later.

Each year, an estimated 48 million Americans contract a foodborne illness and some – mostly those that are more vulnerable like the elderly, young, and chronically ill – may die as a result. We have laws, regulations, and inspections that make our food supply among the safest in the world. However, those protections only go as far as the point at which we purchase the food to take home ourselves. Foodborne illness is 100% preventable. Draw your Christmas meal to a real close - use safe food handling practices this holiday season and throughout the year. Keep your family healthy, happy, and safely fed.

For more information on safe food handling practices and food storage guidelines, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!