HOW TO SURIVE THE HOLIDAY BANQUETS

KILLER TURKEYS…***NOT!***

The single food responsible for the most cases of foodborne illness is turkey, a mainstay of American holiday meals. But that's probably just a reflection of the fact that so much of it is consumed in this country. Also, large groups of people, typical of holiday meals, tend to report their illnesses more: "Hey, you sick, *too*?" With all its faults, the United States has the safest food supply in the world – by far. That's the good news. The bad news is we tend to make good food dangerous by handling it improperly. This is especially true around the holiday seasons, when increased demands on our time make food preparation shortcuts more attractive.

But safe food handling doesn't have to take a lot of your time, nor does it have to involve a lot of high-tech. gadgets. It's really as simple as "1-2-3". For example, you can reduce your chances of getting sick from food by 90% by remembering just *one* thing; you can reduce your chances by 99% by remembering just *two* things, and you can virtually eliminate the likelihood that you'll get sick from a holiday meal – or any other meal – by remembering just *three* things. Simple things!

…AND DON'T SNEEZE!

An esteemed food expert had a way of reducing these cardinal food safety principles to their lowest terms:

1) **Wash Your Hands.**
2) **Keep It Hot or Cold.**
3) **Don't Sneeze.**

Sure, there a lots of other things one can do to reduce risk. That's why the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends restaurant inspectors pay attention to more than 40 different items: to reduce the potential for foodborne illness to virtually zero. But if you're busy – and who isn't these days – you can get pretty close to zero by just concentrating on the three things above.

First: Your mother was right! (But you knew that.) Always wash your hands before coming to the table and before handling food. Wash them BEFORE handling foods, wash them BETWEEN handling different types of raw foods, and different jobs such as washing dishes and preparing food. Wash you hands AFTER using the toilet, blowing your nose, touching your face or hair, coughing, eating, cleaning or picking something up off the floor. Our hands *always* have bacteria and viruses on them, but unwashed hands obviously have a lot more. Why not give yourself and your meal guests an edge, and don't transfer those germs to the food?

Second: Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.

A. HEATING:

Cook foods properly. That means they should be heated for a long enough time and at a high enough temperature to kill the harmful germs that cause foodborne illness. Use a thermometer to ensure that meats are completely cooked. Use a thermometer with a

small-diameter stem. Insert the thermometer one to two inches into the center of the food and wait 30 seconds to ensure an accurate measurement.

Here are some examples of *minimum* cooking temperatures:

- **Poultry, poultry stuffing, and stuffed meats** should be cooked to heat all parts of the food to at least 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

- **Pork and pork products** should be cooked to heat all parts of the food to at least 150 degrees Fahrenheit.

- **Rare roast beef and steaks** should be cooked to an internal temperature of at least 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

Don't eat poultry or pork that is pink inside.

B. COOLING:

According to classic experiments, *the single greatest cause of foodborne illness is improper cooling.* Because there's usually so much food involved after the holiday feast, most of these problems probably occur right around those times. Since germs multiply very, very rapidly, potentially hazardous foods such as meats and dairy products should be refrigerated as soon as possible, and never be left out more than a few hours after a meal. Some folks think it's O.K. to leave the turkey out overnight. But be advised if you do that, you're asking for trouble – big time! You must always assume that germs are everywhere in our environment. It's true that ***most*** of them can't harm you after they're cooked, but others can. For example, many people carry the Staphyloccus aureus bacteria on their skin and in their noses. If one of those folks touches the bird, given enough time and improper temperatures, "staph" germs will form a poison that further cooking will not destroy. People who ingest this staph toxin get staphylococcal food poisoning within an hour or two. To say the least, it is one extremely unpleasant affliction. After recovering, often victims say: "it doesn't kill you…but you wish it would!"

Put thermometers in your refrigerator and freezer to be sure they maintain temperatures of 45 degrees and zero degrees Fahrenheit, respectively. Large portions of a hot food should be divided into smaller parcels, or put in shallow pans to hasten cooling. Because heat is transferred so slowly in a big bird, it's safer to cook the stuffing in a separate dish. But if you chose not to do so, be sure to remove the stuffing from the body cavity before refrigerating. **All** leftovers should be heated to 165 degrees Fahrenheit before serving.

Third: Don't Sneeze! Your mother was right…again! Cover your mouth when you sneeze! Good advice, but we mean a little more, here. What we mean is don't "cross-contaminate." Of course, don't contaminate the food or work surfaces by sneezing on them, but take it a step further: To eliminate the cross-contamination that can occur from contaminated juices, always store raw meats *below* the fruits and vegetable and other things that won't be later cooked. And don't let the raw meats contaminate the cutting boards or utensils that will be later used for salads. Cooking will kill the germs on the meat, but cooked salad is yucky! It's best to use separate cutting boards, but washing and sanitizing them between meats and vegetables will work. To sanitize the cutting boards (or any utensil) 1) Wash in hot, soapy water; 2) Rinse in clear water; 3) Immerse

for one minute in a sanitizing solution and allow the utensil to air dry. A sanitizing solution may be made by adding one ounce of household chlorine bleach to two gallons of lukewarm water.

SUMMARY:

The St. Charles County Department of Community Health and The Environment wishes you and yours very happy and safe holidays. For more general information about food safety, or other health issues, please contact us at www.scchealth.org. If you have questions about any of the points mentioned in this article, or if would just like to say "hello," please contact us at (636) 949-7406, or e-mail the food supervisor at druckb@lpha.health.state.mo.us.