

Thanksgiving is known for family gatherings, parades and of course copious amounts of delicious food.

any people agree that one of the best benefits of Thanksgiving is the leftovers, but without the proper precautions, they may pose a danger to families. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many “flu” cases over Thanksgiving breaks are actually cases of food poisoning. In fact, more than 400,000 people each year suffer from food poisoning after eating Thanksgiving leftovers. Consider some food safety advice before raiding the fridge.

Temperature danger zone

Bacteria grow rapidly between 41 and 135 degrees and after just a few hours can grow to dangerous levels that cause illness. Leftovers should not be left at room temperature for more than two hours. Food stored properly in the refrigerator is good for three to four days and up to three to four months in the freezer. Refrigerators should have an internal air temperature below 41 degrees. Use an inexpensive appliance thermometer to ensure the refrigerator’s temperature is cold enough. Remember, the clock starts ticking as soon as the food is done cooking.

Cool and store foods safely

Once in the fridge, food needs to rapidly cool to below 40 degrees. The smaller the portion size, the faster the food will cool to safe temperatures in the refrigerator. Cut large items of food into smaller portions to cool. This will ensure the centers of larger portions of foods do not remain in the temperature danger zone.

Reheating and thawing

It is crucial for leftovers to be heated thoroughly to 165 degrees. A food thermometer placed into the center of the food is the best way to check. Bring sauces, gravies and soups to a boil. To help evenly distribute the heat in food, stir foods during reheating and allow foods to stand for a few minutes after heating in the microwave. Frozen leftovers can be thawed in the refrigerator, cold water or the microwave, but never on the counter. If thawing in cold water, use leak-proof packaging and change the water every 30 minutes to speed up the thawing process.

Following these tips will ensure this Thanksgiving holiday is safe and enjoyable. Everyone eats, so food safety is everybody’s business. Remember to always wash hands before preparing foods and eating, and when in doubt, throw it out.

Talk to a food safety expert about Thanksgiving dinner at the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-MPHotline. Consumers may also visit FoodSafety.gov to learn how to safely select, thaw and prepare a turkey. For more Thanksgiving food safety tips, follow FSIS on Twitter, @USDAFoodSafety, or on Facebook at [Facebook.com/FoodSafety.gov](https://www.facebook.com/FoodSafety.gov).

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