

Cook it safe so holiday memories are merry and bright

'Tis the season to be jolly. So don't let food poisoning interfere with your festive cheer.

Ontario's Acting Chief Medical Officer of Health is reminding all Ontarians to make sure they follow safe food practices this holiday season. Whether it's baking goodies for friends or cooking entrées for family, Dr. David Williams suggests keeping these four safe food-handling tips top of mind:

1. Clean Clean your hands, surfaces and equipment and do it well. Bacteria can get onto hands, cutting boards, knives, dishcloths, countertops and the food itself.

2. Separate Separate meat, poultry and fish from ready-to-eat foods during storage and preparation to prevent the spread of bacteria.

3. Cook Cook your food thoroughly, especially meat and poultry, such as turkey.

4. Chill Chill your foods to four degrees Celsius or lower within two hours of purchase or preparation, especially for high-risk foods like meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy products.

There are other ways to be food safe when entertaining over the holidays.

If preparing food for a party, never defrost food on the kitchen counter before cooking. Thaw meat safely in the fridge or under cold running water to avoid the growth of bacteria that can make you sick.

If hosting buffet style, use warming units or ice trays if the food will be out longer than two hours. Remember to keep the hot stuff hot and the cold stuff cold.

If taking food to a party, keep hot foods at 60 degrees Celsius or warmer, and cold foods at four degrees Celsius or colder.

If taking home leftovers, make sure to refrigerate or freeze food left out at room temperature within two hours of being served.

Disease-causing bacteria can grow quickly at room temperature.

'Food poisoning happens when people eat food that is contaminated with harmful bacteria, viruses or parasites,' Williams observed.

'Every year, thousands of Ontarians suffer from food poisoning due to improper food handling in their own homes. Small children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with existing health conditions are most at risk. That's why it's important to wash hands and surfaces, and eat foods that are properly washed, stored and cooked this holiday season.'

Food poisoning can vary from minor to severe, with symptoms appearing from hours to weeks after eating contaminated food.

Symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, stomach cramps and stomach pain.

Young children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems are at greatest risk of suffering from serious cases of food poisoning, which can cause paralysis, double vision, difficulty swallowing and breathing, and even death.

Contact your doctor if you experience signs or symptoms of food poisoning.