

Keeping Food Safe: Special Tips for Potluck Parties ¹

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Photo by: Joel R. Terrell

Potluck parties are very popular in the United States because they allow people to share responsibility of cooking and food preparation. While it's wonderful to be able to share favorite recipes with friends and to have the opportunity to eat a variety of foods without much cost, potluck meals are also associated with an increased risk of foodborne illness. Why is this? First, the people who prepare meals for potluck parties are not trained food service professionals and may lack food safety knowledge. Second, because of the wide variety of foods served at potluck parties, it can be difficult to keep all the different dishes at a safe temperature. Many types of food, such as dishes prepared with meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, dairy products, cooked rice, and vegetables, need *temperature control*. Such foods should never be kept in the temperature

danger zone (40°F–140°F) for more than two hours (one hour, if in extreme heat—for instance, on a day when it is 90°F). To decrease your risk of foodborne illness, it's very important to follow the “two-hour rule” and refrigerate all such prepared foods within two hours of purchasing or cooking. Continue reading for more potluck food safety tips!

Plan Ahead

- Keep food safety in mind as you plan your potluck dish.
- If you or your family members are sick with gastroenteritis (a stomach “bug” or stomach “flu”), do not prepare foods for others.
- Prepare foods that are easy to serve with utensils.
- When possible, bring items that do not require temperature control, such as whole fresh fruits, nuts, dried fruits, and certain types of baked goods.
- If you bring hot or cold foods, make sure that you have a way to keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold.

Preparation

- Properly wash your hands before preparing foods.
- Whenever you want to taste food, use the *Two Spoon Tasting Method*. Take a food sample from a container with a clean spoon or utensil, and put it into another spoon for tasting.

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- Minimize the handling of foods with bare hands. Instead, use utensils, especially when mixing cold salads that contain cooked ingredients, such as potato, ham, chicken, or pasta salads.
- For cold mixed dishes, allow ingredients to cool before mixing them together.
- After they are mixed, cold salads must be kept cool (at 40°F or lower) at all times.
- Keep *cold foods* at 40°F or colder. Place dishes in bowls of ice, or use small serving trays and replace them often.
- Wash plates and utensils with hot, soapy water to minimize the risk of cross contamination.
- Teach children and young family members good hygiene practices, such as washing their hands before taking food from the serving table.

Use a food thermometer to check food temperatures frequently. After the party, discard any food that was left in the danger zone (40°F–140°F) for more than two hours (or more than one hour on a very hot day).

Transporting

- Keep cold food (such as cold salads with ingredients such as ham, chicken, tuna, and potatoes) at 40°F or below. Use a cooler with ice or gel packs.
- Keep hot foods (such as stews and chili) at 140°F or above. Use an insulated container, such as a crock pot wrapped in paper bags, during travel.
- Wrap casserole dishes with aluminum foil. Pack just before leaving home and open the container right before serving.
- Do not transport food and animals in the same vehicle.

Serving

- Assign one person to be in charge of checking the food to ensure it is safe to eat.
- Keep surfaces clean and use clean dishes and utensils to serve.
- Provide plenty of utensils for each item so that people can avoid touching the food.

Reheating Leftovers

- Reheat leftovers to 165°F.
- Serve food onto clean, small plates and do not refill them; use new clean plates.
- Use long-handled utensils so that handles do not fall into the food.
- Separate raw foods from cooked and ready-to-eat foods.
- Keep *hot foods* at 140°F or warmer. Use slow cookers and warming trays.

Storing Leftovers

- If foods have been safely handled and have not been in the danger zone for more than two hours, the leftovers are safe to eat.
- Divide leftover food into smaller portions and put it in clean, shallow, covered containers or resealable bags.
- Immediately place leftovers in the refrigerator (40°F or lower) or freezer for rapid cooling.
- Use cooked leftovers within 3 to 4 days.

For More Information about Food Safety

Follow all the tips for Shopping, Storage, and Preparing and Cooking in the Keeping Food Safe Series.

References

United States Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service, Safe Food Handling. Cooking for Groups. Accessed January 12, 2011.