



Avoiding Potluck Perils

*****Denise Smith, University of Wyoming Extension Educator,
Nutrition and Food Safety, Converse, Natrona, and Niobrara Counties

The holiday season has arrived and entertaining is at its peak. Potluck parties are popular during the holiday season because they ease the burden of food preparation plus they offer a variety of delicious foods for the guests. In order for your potluck party to be successful, fun and illness-free, there are certain food safety practices that must be followed. The flu-like symptoms of nausea, diarrhea, cramps, fever, headache and muscle pain may not be the *flu*, but a foodborne illness. For some people including the old, the young, pregnant women and those with compromised immune systems, a foodborne illness can be life threatening.



Food safety is really just common sense. The first rule of food safety is to *keep everything clean*. This includes having good personal hygiene and keeping all food preparation surfaces, equipment and utensils clean.

The second rule is to *keep foods separate* to avoid cross contamination. Always keep raw foods separate from cooked and ready-to-eat foods while grocery shopping, during transportation home, during storage in the refrigerator and during food preparation.

The third rule is to *cook foods properly*. Foods should be cooked to the proper internal temperature which kills or destroys most parasites, bacteria and viruses. Use a calibrated food thermometer to check temperatures.

Rule four is to *keep hot foods hot*. Once cooked, potentially hazardous foods, must be kept hot at 135 degrees or hotter. Use crock pots, chafing dishes or other methods to keep foods hot, safe to serve to your guests.

The fifth rule is to *keep cold foods cold*, at temperatures below 41 degrees. Cold salads need to be made with cold ingredients and kept cold, to maximize food safety. Use coolers, ice packs or ice baths to transport and serve cold foods. Potentially hazardous foods should never be in the “Danger Zone” (41-135 degrees) for more than a total of two hours. Potentially hazardous foods include meat, eggs, fish, shellfish, milk and dairy products, sprouts, cut melons, cream pies, and cooked potatoes, beans, rice or pasta.

Foods are safest within the first two hours after they are cooked. To transport hot foods, wrap the item in several layers of aluminum foil, then a heavy towel and/or newspapers, and transport in an insulated cooler. For optimum potluck safety, prepare hot dishes right before the meal, rather than cooking and cooling in advance and then reheating at the potluck party. If foods need to be re-warmed before serving, do not use warming trays or crock pots. An oven or a microwave must be used. The food must be re-heated quickly to 165 degrees.



If the temperature cannot be controlled, eat the food within two hours and throw away leftovers. This rule applies to both hot and cold foods. If you cannot keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold during the transportation and serving time, bring foods to the party that don't require temperature control. Foods such as crackers, cookies, fresh vegetables and chips are always safe to take. You can't see, smell or taste the bacteria that causes foodborne illness, so it is better to be safe than sorry.

Other tips:

- Do not prepare food for a potluck party if you or someone in your home has had diarrhea, vomiting or fever within the past week. Sickness can be passed on to others at the party through your food.
- If there will not be hand washing facilities at the party, take foods that can be eaten with silverware and not with your hands.
- Be sure to provide a spoon in each dip to prevent “double dipping”.

- Provide each dish on the serving table with long-handled utensils that won't get buried in food, or provide other serving barriers such as napkins, wrappers or tissues, so guests do not use their hands to serve themselves.
- Increased handling of the food with hands increases the risk of foodborne illness.
- Each dish should include a card identifying the ingredients used, just in case some guests have food allergies. Including the preparer's name is also helpful, in case any guests would like the recipe.
- Supply plenty of places to dispose of garbage and to handle used silverware and dishes. Keeping garbage and used utensils away from the serving area will help prevent cross-contamination of food and the serving area.

If foods have been handled properly during preparation, transportation, serving and storage, the leftovers can be reused. Leftover hot foods must be rapidly reheated to at least 165 degrees to eliminate potential bacteria.

Potluck parties can be great fun, but be sure to use basic safe food handling practices to make sure no "uninvited guests" are at your festivities.

Sources:

Potluck Food Safety Guidelines, University of Florida.

Potluck Food Safety Guidelines, Manchester, NH Health Department.

Keeping Potluck Meals Safe, Kids First Healthy Schools! Healthy Kids!;

Requirements of On Campus Potluck Events, University of Minnesota Environmental Health and Safety.

