



Cooking for a Crowd

Events we look forward to during the summer months include BBQ's, reunions, and activities which bring larger groups together to enjoy foods and a wealth of memories and opportunities to relax and reconnect with friends and family.

Food-borne illness outbreaks are also sometimes associated with large gatherings, whether they occur during the summer or during the holidays. Experts agree that it is often more challenging to cook for large numbers of people, and that the result can be food-borne illness. The following tips should be helpful in preventing food-borne illness at your next large gathering:

1. Follow basic food safety guidelines while cooking for large groups – wash your hands for twenty seconds with warm soapy water before beginning cooking; make sure your food preparation surfaces are clean and sanitized. Continue to wash your hands and utensils as you transition from handling raw to cooked foods.
2. Follow safe cooking temperatures and use a food thermometer while cooking meats. To be safe, ground poultry should be cooked to 165 degrees; other ground meats should be cooked to 160 degrees. Beef, veal and fish should be cooked to 145 degrees or higher; Pork and lamb products should be cooked to at least 155 degrees; and poultry should be cooked to 165 degrees.
3. We often use larger quantities of meat in cooking for crowds. To safely thaw meats, they should be thawed on the lower shelf of your refrigerator. To thaw meat more quickly, use a clean sink, running cool water over the meat for less than two hours. Submerge the meat in a bowl of some sort, but don't unwrap it. You can also thaw meats in your microwave, turning the meat often to avoid 'hot spots' and 'frozen spots.' Thawed meat should be cooked. Meats thawed with cool water or a microwave should be cooked immediately thawing.
4. Be aware of the "Temperature Danger Zone"! Perishable foods should not remain at room temperature for longer than two hours – one hour if it's a hot day. Keep hot foods above 140 degrees F, and cold foods below 41 degrees F, to prevent entry into the "danger zone" where food-borne microbes multiply rapidly. Accomplish this by placing bowls of salad into larger bowls of ice; or by maintaining heat for hot items.
5. One trick for managing time in cooking for a crowd, is cooking ahead. When you prepare foods in advance of serving them, DO NOT cool those foods on the countertop before refrigerating. Instead, divide the food into smaller pieces and shallow containers, loosely cover them, and refrigerate immediately so they cool quickly to be safe for later use. Large quantities of hot soup, stock, or stew can be cooled with an "ice paddle" or "cooling wand". Make your own "ice paddle" at home using a plastic one or two liter bottle. Wash and sanitize the bottle thoroughly, removing the label; partially fill the bottle with water and freeze it solid. Use the ice

paddle to stir your liquid item to cool it quickly before transferring it to refrigerator containers. Be sure to store these leftovers on the top shelf of the refrigerator.

6. When reheating previously cooked items, heat them to a minimum of 165 degrees. Hot dogs and other pre-cooked meats should also be heated to 165 degrees before consumption. This is especially important for pregnant women, small children, and the elderly, all at increased risk for listeria, a food-borne illness which can be found in processed meat products.

As you enjoy sharing a meal with your friends and family, choose to cook foods safe!

For more information about food safety when cooking for groups, contact the UW Extension Area Nutrition and Food Safety Educator, or a member of the Wyoming Food Safety Coalition.

Source: Donna Birkholz, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Area Educator.