

"MEATY" ADVICE FOR HOLIDAY COOKS

New Survey from the American Dietetic Association Reveals Americans Plan More Meat for This Year's Menu

Chicago, December 16, 2004 Forget "visions of sugar plums": When it comes to the holidays, Americans are thinking "meat." According to a new survey conducted by the American Dietetic Association, 98 percent of Americans typically serve meat as a main course for their holiday dinner, while 92 percent say they also serve a side dish containing meat some or most of the time. And this year, even more meat is expected to make the menu.

Survey results show nearly two out of three Americans (65 percent) will serve more than one type of meat at this year's holiday meal - and 47 percent say they're serving multiple meat dishes to accommodate different taste and dietary preferences.

But the survey found that most of these home cooks are not following proper food safety procedures when it comes to cooking and handling raw meat, which can put themselves and their holiday guests at risk for foodborne illness.

Before you baste the turkey or bake the ham, follow these tips from the ADA to make sure your holiday meal is safe as well as delicious.

The Right Thaw-t Process

According to the ADA survey, nearly one in three Americans (31 percent) typically thaws frozen meat on the kitchen counter, under hot water in the kitchen sink or in the oven. But while these shortcuts may seem quick, they can make you sick.

When perishable foods like raw meat sit at room temperature for more than two hours, bacteria start to grow rapidly - which means your holiday meat dish may be spoiled before it even hits the table.

Make sure your meal gets off to a safe start by thawing meat in a refrigerator set below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, in a microwave on the "defrost" setting or under cold water in the kitchen sink (just make sure meat is wrapped in airtight packaging and water is changed every 30 minutes to keep it below 40 degrees Fahrenheit).

Tried-and-True Turkey Tricks

Turkey ranks first as America's most popular holiday meat dish (94 percent), followed by ham (72 percent), chicken (21 percent), seafood (21 percent), specialty sausages (21 percent), roast (19 percent) and beef/prime rib (18 percent).

But according to the ADA survey, nearly three out of four Americans say they do not know the proper temperature to which a whole turkey should be cooked - and more than half (52 percent) do not consistently use a meat thermometer to ensure doneness. Instead, 40 percent wait for meat to "look done" or for "the juices to run clear," while a small percentage (5 percent) use unconventional techniques such as wiggling turkey legs, poking meat with a fork or even conducting a taste-test.

Some of these methods may be as traditional as the recipes themselves, but the only accurate way to confirm the doneness of meat is to use a meat thermometer to make sure it reaches a proper internal temperature. For a whole turkey, that's 180 degrees Fahrenheit, and stuffing should reach 165 degrees.

For a quick reference of temperatures, visit www.homefoodsafety.org and download your own copy of the Home Food Safety Holiday Helper. The printer-friendly chart lists proper internal temperatures for all of your favorite holiday meats - from traditional turkey and ham to more exotic fare such as venison and game birds.

Rules of Separation

While most home cooks may use separate cutting boards for raw meats and ready-to-eat foods, survey results show some don't realize the same rules of separation apply to meat thermometers and basting brushes as well.

According to the ADA survey, 30 percent of home cooks who use a meat thermometer to check the doneness of meats do not wash the thermometer between each "check" - a habit that can lead to cross-contamination. In addition, more than one in four (26 percent) say they typically use the same brush to marinate both raw and cooked meats without washing the brush between uses. Always wash thermometers and brushes in hot, soapy water between each use.

Tips for the Early Bird...or Ham or Roast

Everyone knows a large main meat dish can take hours to cook - but according to the ADA survey, more than half of Americans (51 percent) say their dilemma occurs when the main course is ready hours before guests arrive.

If your main meat dish is done too soon, take precautions to keep it safe until dinner is served. Remove meat from the oven and store it, covered, in the refrigerator. (Keeping meat on the kitchen counter can allow harmful bacteria to grow, and leaving meat in the oven can cause it to be overdone.) Then, when guests arrive, reheat meat in the oven or microwave until it reaches a proper internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit. Also note it's important to bring leftover gravy to a boil before serving it a second time.

And if you're serving stuffed turkey, make sure to remove the stuffing, legs, thighs and wings before refrigerating and store pieces separately in shallow containers.

Home Food Safety Tools for the Littlest Helping Hands

According to the ADA survey, kids also play a big role in helping prepare for holiday meals - from setting the table (50 percent) and cleaning up (38 percent) to baking (30 percent) and preparing pre-dinner appetizers and snacks (25 percent). This holiday season, start a tradition of home food safety by encouraging kids to take the "Cookie Rookie Pledge" before helping in the kitchen, and reward them for practicing proper home food safety with a ***Cookie Rookie Certificate of Achievement***, downloadable from www.homefoodsafety.org.

With approximately 65,000 members, the American Dietetic Association is the nation's largest organization of food and nutrition professionals. ADA serves the public by promoting optimal nutrition, health and well-being. To locate a registered dietitian in your area, visit the American Dietetic Association at www.eatright.org.

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**Source: American Dietetic Association Survey conducted by Impulse Research Corporation, November 2004.*

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