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Contact: Danny Chun: 630-276-5558  
[dchun@team-ihc.org](mailto:dchun@team-ihc.org)

**Lose Harmful Bacteria—Not Your Appetite—This Holiday Season**  
*Nation's oldest poison center offers tips to avoid foodborne illness*

'Tis the season for family, friends, fun, and...food poisoning. For some unfortunate merrymakers, holiday feasts will start in the dining room and end in the bathroom. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that every year, more than 76 million people experience foodborne illness.

“Holiday meals can be tricky; home chefs are preparing dishes they don't usually cook and for large numbers of people,” says Michael Wahl, M.D., medical director, Illinois Poison Center (IPC). “At many celebrations, different types of foods are left out in the open for extended periods of time or not stored properly, which can allow harmful bacteria to grow.”

The IPC wants all Illinoisans to have a healthy and festive season. Whether you're roasting a turkey, preparing a fruit salad or volunteering as a taste tester, be careful when cooking—or eating—these holiday staples:

**Meat**

As many ways as there are to prepare beef, lamb, poultry, and other kinds of meat, there are just as many varieties of bacteria that can cause infection if food is not cooked thoroughly. Meat can harbor bacteria such as *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and *Staphylococcus aureus*, more commonly known as staph. Staph is often found on people's skin, finger nails and noses, which can contaminate food they prepare. The bacteria can grow on the food and excrete Staphylococcal enterotoxin B, a common cause of food poisoning. Symptoms—such as vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal cramps—usually develop within one to eight hours after eating contaminated food and can last one to two days, long enough to ruin any holiday break.

**Potato salad**

Creamy potato salad is a delicious complement to any main course, but that doesn't mean its potential for food poisoning is any less than an entrée's. In addition to staph, there have been reports of food-borne illness from potato salad contaminated with *Shigella* bacteria. If someone has the bacteria on their hands and doesn't wash them before handling food or drinks, *Shigella* can find its way into dishes like potato salad, where it can multiply at room temperature. Anywhere from one to seven days after eating food contaminated with *Shigella*, diners may experience abdominal cramps, diarrhea, fever, vomiting, or blood, pus or mucus in stool.

**Fried rice**

Think your stomach is safe if you don't cook? Think again. If your holiday traditions include takeout, watch out for leftover fried rice. Uncooked rice can contain spores of *Bacillus cereus*, bacteria that can survive on grains of rice even after they're cooked. When left at room temperature for extended periods of time, the bacteria can multiply, potentially causing vomiting and diarrhea.

### Eggs

Raw or undercooked eggs can also be a breeding ground for *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and staph. *Salmonella* is found in the intestinal tracts of animals, and when infected feces contaminate improperly prepared food, the bacteria can be transmitted to humans. Symptoms commonly appear eight to 12 hours after eating. To avoid diarrhea, fever, abdominal cramps, and vomiting, think twice before dipping a spoon or finger into cookie dough, brownie batter or anything else containing uncooked eggs.

Can't imagine your holiday gathering without one or all of these foods? You're in luck. Enjoy your favorite seasonal dishes with these food safety tips from the IPC:

- Keep countertops, stovetops, refrigerators, and other food preparation and storage areas clean;
- Do not prepare food if you are sick or have any type of eye or sinus infection;
- Cover raw food and store it below cooked food in the refrigerator to avoid cross contamination;
- Only thaw meat and poultry in the refrigerator or microwave;
- Wash your hands with soap and warm, running water for at least 20 seconds before preparing any foods and especially after handling raw meat, poultry, fish, or eggs;
- Use separate cutting boards: one for meats, poultry and fish and one for bread, fruits and vegetables that can be eaten without further cooking;
- Wash cooking utensils after each use, as dirty utensils can be a source of contamination;
- Use a meat thermometer to confirm that meat and poultry are properly cooked, and visit <http://www.foodsafety.gov> for temperature guidelines;
- Properly seal and store leftovers in the refrigerator no later than two hours after preparing the food; and
- When in doubt, throw it out, especially when dealing with meat, poultry and dairy.

For more information on food safety and other topics from the IPC, [click here](#).

IPC experts are available to provide information and treatment advice 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, including holidays. If you suspect that you or someone you know has been exposed to a potentially harmful substance, please call the IPC at 800-222-1222. The call is free and confidential. For more information, visit the IPC's website: <http://illinoispoisoncenter.org>.

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The Illinois Poison Center is a nonprofit health service that provides the people of Illinois with comprehensive and trusted information and treatment advice on potentially harmful substances via a free, confidential 24-hour helpline staffed by specially trained physicians, nurses and pharmacists.