



NEWS RELEASE

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CONTACT:

Michael.Claffey@illinois.gov

James.Leach@illinois.gov

IDPH Urges Illinoisans to Celebrate Thanksgiving Holiday Safely by Taking Precautions Against Food-borne and Respiratory Illnesses

While risk of respiratory viruses is lower than recent years, hosts are still urged to provide good ventilation for gatherings, stress hand hygiene & covering coughs
CHICAGO – The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) is reminding Illinoisans to celebrate the 2024 Thanksgiving holiday safely by taking precautions to protect everyone from foodborne illnesses as well as uninvited guests - those seasonal viruses that may be circulating. Hosts can protect their guests by following basic food safety steps, including keeping hot foods hot, cold foods cold, and properly thawing frozen turkeys before roasting them.

“Thanksgiving is one of my favorite holidays,” said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra. “I love the food, spending time with family and friends, and the football. As we gather in community this week, I want to remind everybody, and especially those preparing food, that we can prevent unwanted illnesses by following proven food safety tips. Two of the most important are: thoroughly thaw frozen turkeys in the fridge and make sure the turkey and stuffing are cooked to a safe temperature of 165° Fahrenheit.”

IDPH’s [Seasonal Respiratory Illness Dashboard](#) currently indicates low levels of seasonal respiratory illnesses such as flu, COVID-19 and RSV, but activity is expected to pick up as the weather cools and activities move indoors.

Director Vohra also stresses that hosts can enhance the safety of guests by providing [proper indoor ventilation](#), encouraging [good hand hygiene](#), and reminding guests to [cover coughs and sneezes](#). If someone is feeling sick with respiratory symptoms such as fever, cough or sore throat or other symptoms, such as diarrhea or vomiting, it is best to stay away from others until the illness passes. If staying away from others is not possible, wear a mask and eat at a distance from others, and wash hands before touching any common food sources or other objects.

The best way to protect yourself from seasonal viruses is being adequately vaccinated. The FDA and CDC have approved 2024-2025 seasonal vaccines for [COVID-19](#) and [flu](#) as well as updated who can receive the [RSV](#) vaccines. The new COVID-19 and flu shots are recommended for everyone over the age of 6 months. And RSV vaccine is recommended for everyone 75 years and older, as well as those 60 to 74 who are at increased risk for severe RSV, who didn’t receive the vaccine last season. Pregnant people and young babies born between October and March should also get immunized for RSV.

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When it comes to food safety, the [CDC offers tips on how properly cook a turkey](#) and avoid serious foodborne illnesses such as Salmonellosis. The first step is to safely thaw the bird. When turkey begins to thaw, any germs or bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again. This is why food safety experts recommend thawing turkeys in the refrigerator. It takes about 24 hours for every five pounds of turkey to thaw in the refrigerator, so it can take three days to thaw a 15-pound bird. If you don't have time to use the refrigerator, you can use a sink of cold water (change water every 30 minutes), or a microwave. Never thaw your turkey by leaving it out on the counter.

The [four main steps for food safety](#) are:

- **Clean** – Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap and water before, during, and after preparing your food, especially before and after handling turkey, and before eating. Wash cutting boards, utensils, dishes, and countertops with hot soapy water after preparing raw turkey and before you prepare the next item.
- **Separate** – Raw turkey and its juice can contaminate anything they touch. Keep the turkey and its juices separate from foods that won't be cooked and fully clean and sanitize surfaces that come into contact with turkey and its juices to prevent harmful germs from spreading to other food or your family and friends. Use one cutting board or plate for raw meat, poultry, and seafood and a separate cutting board or plate for produce, bread, and other foods that won't be cooked.
- **Cook** – Use a food thermometer to check if the turkey and stuffing have reached a safe internal temperature of 165° F. Take the temperature in three places – the thickest part of the breast, the innermost part of the thigh, and the innermost part of the wing. For stuffing, make sure the stuffing's center reaches 165°F.
- **Chill** – For leftovers to be safe to keep, they must be refrigerated within two hours of serving or have been kept hot at or above 140°F or cold below 40°F. Discard any foods that sat out for more than two hours at room temperature. After eating, divide the remaining food into small containers and refrigerate or freeze it. Leftovers are safe in the fridge for up to four days. Reheat all leftovers to at least 165°F before serving or eating.

An easy rule is keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. And [avoid food handling mistakes like](#) thawing food on the counter or peeling fruits without washing them first.

Typical symptoms of foodborne illness include vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, fever, and nausea, which can start anywhere from hours to days after consuming contaminated food or drinks. Symptoms can last from a few hours to a few days. It is important to stay hydrated when you have diarrhea and vomiting. Those at risk of severe or life-threatening foodborne illness include older adults, infants, young children, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems. If you become severely ill, or if you are at risk for more severe disease, seek care from a medical provider to ensure a proper diagnosis and appropriate illness management.

More information on [Food Safety During the Holidays](#) can be found on the IDPH website.

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