

The New Jersey Poison Control Center — Serving New Jersey Since 1983

HEALTH ADVISORY

Food Safety is the Secret to a Happy Thanksgiving

Holiday traditions, family gatherings, and home-cooked meals are a treasured part of the holiday season. With Thanksgiving just days away, families are hard at work preparing for Thanksgiving dinner and spending time with loved ones. Meal prep can be overwhelming and stressful especially when cooking for a large group of people. With distractions all around, it's easy to make mistakes that may cause guests to leave with more than full bellies.

Common Thanksgiving Fails

- Forgetting to thaw the turkey.
- Undercooking the turkey or stuffing.
- Cooking the turkey in the packaging.
- Forgetting about a guest's food allergy.
- Eating the fake fruit and vegetables used for table decorations.

"Whether you're preparing dinner for two or a large group, following simple food safety steps will keep everyone at the table from becoming sick," says Diane Calello, executive and medical director of the [New Jersey Poison Control Center](http://NJPoisonCenter.org) at [Rutgers New Jersey Medical School](http://RutgersNJMS.edu). "Foods can become contaminated with germs at any point of the food production chain — from farming to grocery stores to kitchens and leftovers. Preparing, cooking, or storing foods incorrectly can make them unsafe to eat."

Everyone is at risk of foodborne illness (also known as food poisoning) but young children, pregnant women, and people with weakened immune systems are more likely to get sick from eating foods contaminated with bacteria and other germs.

Foodborne illness is common and can cause mild to severe sickness. Symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhea, upset stomach, and fever. A person may not feel sick right away because symptoms may appear a few hours or days after eating. Anyone sick with a respiratory illness like a cold, flu, RSV, or COVID-19 should not prepare or cook meals for other people because their germs can spread to foods and drinks.

Raw poultry, meat, and seafood can spread germs to anything they touch including foods, hands, countertops and surfaces, sinks, utensils, dishes, containers, and cutting boards. When preparing and cooking food, follow these [four safety steps](#) (Clean, Separate, Cook, and Chill). Cooking foods to the right temperature kills germs and prevents people from becoming sick.

Guests may also get food poisoning from cooked foods left on the table or counter too long before putting them in the refrigerator. Bacteria and other germs grow quickly in foods that reach temperatures in the “Danger Zone”, between 40°F and 140°F. When serving food, keep foods at safe temperatures; hot foods hot and cold foods cold to prevent illness. It is unsafe to leave foods including pies that contain dairy or eggs out of the refrigerator or freezer for more than two hours.

According to the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), hot foods can go straight into the refrigerator without [cooling](#) first. If reheating leftovers, use a food thermometer to make sure the food reaches at least 165°F.

If this year’s holiday dinner includes turkey, follow these important [steps](#) to prevent illness.

- Allow enough time for the turkey to fully defrost. A partially frozen turkey will cook unevenly, leaving parts undercooked.
- Handle the turkey safely to prevent spreading germs to other foods.
- [Do not wash or rinse raw turkey.](#)
- Cook the stuffing separately from the turkey.
- Use a food thermometer to make sure turkey and other foods are cooked to safe temperatures.
- Store leftovers safely.

If you think someone came in contact with something dangerous, contact the New Jersey Poison Control Center immediately for medical treatment advice. Anyone can call for medical help – children, teens, and adults. Poison control centers are a medical resource for both the public and healthcare providers. Get help 24/7 — Call or [Chat Here](#). If someone is not breathing, hard to wake up, or having a seizure, call 9-1-1.

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Available for Media Interviews

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About New Jersey Poison Control Center/NJPIES, 1-800-222-1222

Chartered in 1983, the New Jersey Poison Information & Education System (NJPIES), known to the public as the New Jersey Poison Control Center, is the state's primary defense against injury and deaths from intentional and unintentional poisonings. It is designated as the state's regional poison control center by the New Jersey Department of Health and the American Association of Poison Control Centers. It is a division of the Department of Emergency Medicine at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. NJPIES has a state-of-the-art center located at Rutgers Health in Newark. NJPIES is funded, in part, by the NJ Department of Health, NJ Hospitals and the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Hotline staff (physicians, registered nurses, and pharmacists) provide free telemedicine consultation through hotline services (telephone, text, chat) regarding poison emergencies and provide information on poison prevention practices, drug interactions and overdoses, food poisoning, environmental chemical exposures, animal/insect bites and stings, plant and other outdoor exposures, carbon monoxide and lead poisonings, and more. NJPIES' services are free, confidential/private, available 24/7, and help is available in any language. Call 1-800-222-1222 or [Chat Here](#).

About Rutgers New Jersey Medical School

Founded in 1954, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School is the oldest school of medicine in the state. Today it is part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and graduates approximately 170 physicians a year. In addition to providing the MD degree, the school offers MD/PhD, MD/MPH, and MD/MBA degrees through collaborations with other institutions of higher education. Dedicated to excellence in education, research, clinical care and community outreach, the medical school comprises 20 academic departments and works with several healthcare partners, including its principal teaching hospital, University Hospital. Its faculty consists of numerous world-renowned scientists and many of the region's "top doctors." Home to the nation's oldest student-run clinic, New Jersey Medical School hosts more than 50 centers and institutes, including the Public Health Research Institute Center, the Global Tuberculosis Institute and the Neurological Institute of New Jersey. For more information, please visit njms.rutgers.edu.

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