

Quick Bites

Holiday Meals — Never Fear

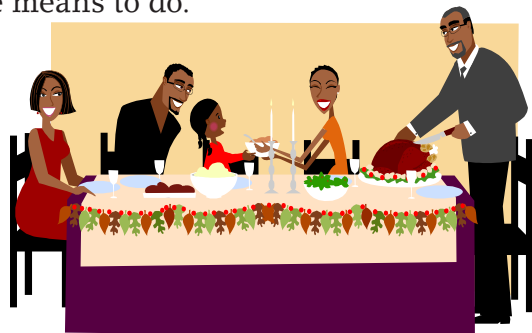
Most of us grew up watching our mothers and grandmothers working feverishly in the kitchen to prepare the “perfect” holiday meal. The meal was usually fabulous, but these hard-working family members often missed most of the day’s festivities, only to be thanked with a pile of dirty dishes. But holidays do not have to strike fear in the hearts of those of us caught in the kitchen. Through good planning, you can actually prepare a great meal and get to spend time with those you love – without flour coating your face.



Make It Quick, Make it Easy

Holiday meals can be quick and easy if you plan them that way. Plan for one meat, a potato or stuffing, a green vegetable and one dessert. As you shop at the grocery store, make sure you make a shopping list for the items you need and stick to it! This will save time and money as you make your way through the holiday crowds.

As you plan your holiday meal, keep in mind, “I can do it!” Most of us are anxious about the meals or dishes we prepare for family events. Plus, we may feel we need to recreate the massive buffet our grandmother fixed for 49 people. Keep it a part of your plan to only prepare what you have the time and the means to do.



Potluck: Share the Load

Potluck is a great way to have a great meal with a smaller budget and work load. Most family members are thrilled to bring their prized recipe to any family event. But, without proper planning, you may be faced with a table full of green bean casseroles instead of a variety of tasty foods. So how do you plan who will bring what? Ask family members to bring items they are comfortable bringing. As you go down your list of family members, adjust the menu accordingly, but don’t feel uncomfortable making suggestions. If Aunt June wants to bring sweet potatoes, but Uncle Joe has already agreed to bring his sweet potatoes, offer some other ideas to better fit your overall menu. You may not have enough fresh vegetables, so ask someone to bring a vegetable tray to munch on while the food is being prepared. Salads are a great addition to a holiday meal and are often overlooked. The holidays are our time to create new traditions, so don’t be afraid to start your own new traditions and lighten your holiday load.

Potluck Safety

Although a potluck is a great opportunity to save time and money, it also increases the risk to serve unsafe food. If some guests have to drive three hours to get to your home, it may be better for them to bring paper plates and utensils instead of the turkey. Guests traveling less than a half-hour can bring perishable foods, such as food containing meats, eggs, dairy products and fruit or vegetable mixtures. When traveling with food, keep hot foods hot by carrying the item in an insulated container, or wrap it in foil and heavy towels. Place cold foods in a cooler with ice or freezer packs. When guests arrive, make sure the cold foods are placed in the refrigerator and hot foods are kept hot until you are ready to serve.



Planning Ahead for Safety

As you grocery shop or receive holiday food



boxes, make sure items are refrigerated, frozen or stored in the pantry as needed. Check for out-of-date, damaged or dented items and throw those things away.

Purchase fresh meat products no more than one or two days before the holiday meal. If you find a great deal on turkey the day after Thanksgiving, buy it, freeze it and save it for your next holiday meal of the season. Thaw frozen meat products in the refrigerator, not on the counter. Allow 24 hours of thawing time for each five pounds of weight. So a 17-pound frozen turkey would need to thaw about three and a half days in your refrigerator.

Those Good Ol' Leftovers

Most of us remember holidays at grandma's house when the leftovers stayed on the table for hours until the next meal. Those tummy aches may not have been due to overeating, but may have been the result of a food-borne illness. Leftover foods should be stored promptly and

correctly (within two hours of the beginning of the meal). Make sure foods like mashed potatoes and dressing are stored in shallow storage containers that are 2 to 3 inches deep. This allows the food to cool quickly. Reheat hot foods thoroughly to a minimum of 165 degrees F or higher. After four days, throw all your leftovers out. Finishing that last bit of turkey is not worth making you or your family sick. Remember, if you typically have a lot of leftovers, that may be a sign you are preparing way too much food. Cutting back can eliminate waste and save you time and money!



Make Hand-Washing a Must

Family gatherings are a great way to spread germs. But how can you encourage family members to wash their hands frequently without being rude? Make a general announcement stating the food will be served in 10 minutes and recommend all your guests wash their hands. Make sure you have plenty of hand soap and paper towels available. Healthy guests will thank you for it!



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