

Preventing Potluck Paranoia

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Potlucks – Sometimes sharing more than food

Traditionally, “potluck” referred to the food provided for an unexpected guest who would get the luck of the pot. Today, a potluck is an event in which each guest or family who attends brings a portion of the meal to share with everyone. It’s a great opportunity to taste a wide variety of foods. Unfortunately, it also may create an opportunity to share foodborne illness. For some people, these shared meals can create a feeling of potluck paranoia, or potluck willies, because they’re not sure that safe food preparation and proper sanitation methods were used. Other guests may have food allergies and may be concerned about the unknown ingredients of the food being shared.

Organizing a safe potluck

Keep the following points in mind when organizing a potluck:

- Plan for travel time. Those traveling long distances should bring nonperishable foods such as breads, cakes, fruit pies and cookies.
- When you transport cold food, place it in a cooler with ice or ice packs to keep the food at 40 °F (USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, 2011, October). Place an appliance thermometer in the cooler to check the temperature.
- When you transport hot foods, store them in insulated bags and insulated carrying cases. If you don’t have insulated bags or cases to transport hot foods, wrap them in foil, then newspaper and then heavy towels.

- Upon arriving at the potluck, place cold food in the refrigerator (40 °F). Place hot food in an oven at its lowest setting to keep it warm before serving and prevent harmful bacteria from growing. Hot food must be kept at 140 °F or above if you aren’t going to serve it right away (USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, 2011, October).
- Plug slow cookers and roasters in immediately after placing food in them and keep them on until ready to serve or even while serving if possible.
- Plan to serve the food as soon as guests arrive.



Serving safe food

Follow these steps for a safe potluck:

- Clean all serving and eating areas with soap and water. Then sanitize with a solution of one teaspoon of regular-strength chlorine bleach mixed in one quart of warm water.
- Wash hands before and after preparing all food. Make sure those helping you do so as well. Make this a rule everyone follows.
- Use hot-holding equipment such as slow cookers and chafing dishes.
- Place cold food on ice to keep it safe.
- Replace empty dishes and platters with fresh ones. Do not add fresh food to dishes you have left out at room temperature.

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- Always have a large supply of tongs, spoons and forks so that each dish has its own serving utensil. In this way, you'll make sure that guests do not handle foods with bare hands and that utensils will not need to be shared between dishes.
- Keep an eye on the clock. Do not let the food sit out longer than two hours at room temperature. If you are serving the food where the temperature is 90 °F or above, such as outside at a summer picnic, do not keep food out longer than one hour (USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service, 2011, October).
- Throw out any food left out at room temperature for more than two hours. Throw out any food left out for more than one hour if the temperature where the food is being served is 90 °F or above.
- When food needs to be out for two or more hours, serve the food in smaller portions. Store the unserved food in the refrigerator or oven until you need to put out more.

Handling leftovers safely

Follow these helpful tips to handle leftover food safely:

- Take the remaining food that was not left out for more than two hours at room temperature or more than one hour at 90 °F and divide into smaller portions. Refrigerate or freeze.
- Do not overload the refrigerator. You may use coolers if you keep them at 40 °F.
- Michigan State University Extension recommends appliance thermometers for refrigerators, freezers and coolers. You can buy them at grocery stores, hardware stores or online.



Special considerations

Keep these extra hints in mind when planning a potluck:

- Display a written list of ingredients of your recipe to help those with food allergies. Ask each guest who brings a dish to include a list of ingredients.
- Use individual serving packets of sugar, relish, mayonnaise and other condiments.
- Have enough trivets and clean potholders.
- Place the dishes attractively. To make your potluck a special event, place items on the table, such as flowers or other small decorations that might have meaning for the occasion.

You can prevent potluck paranoia when guests know that everyone who provided food cares enough to follow safe food-handling practices.

Reference

USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. (2011, October). *Danger zone (40 °F - 140 °F)*. (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC.: Author. Retrieved from http://www.fsis.usda.gov/shared/PDF/Danger_Zone.pdf

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