Preparing for a Safe and Healthy Thanksgiving

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As Thanksgiving approaches, many families look forward to gathering around the table, sharing a meal, and spending time together. While the holiday is often centered on food, it is also an opportunity to reflect on gratitude, make healthy choices, and stay active.

Not every culture has a designated day to express thankfulness, but Thanksgiving provides an opportunity to appreciate the people who enrich our lives. Whether through a shared meal, a phone call, or simply saying "thank you," taking time to acknowledge family, friends, and neighbors can make the holiday more meaningful.

Of course, no Thanksgiving celebration would be complete without the traditional turkey. When building a holiday plate, aim for balance by filling half the plate with fruits and vegetables, one-fourth with lean turkey, and one-fourth with whole grains. This simple approach can help create a nutritious and satisfying meal.

No matter how you choose to cook your turkey, food safety should remain a top priority. Whether roasting, grilling, smoking, using an electric roaster, pressure cooker, or deep-fat fryer, following safe food handling practices helps ensure a successful holiday meal.

If using a deep-fat fryer, always start with a completely thawed turkey. Placing a frozen or partially frozen turkey into hot oil can cause dangerous splattering and fires. It is also important to determine the correct amount of oil before heating the fryer to prevent overflow.

For those using grills, proper placement of the turkey will depend on the size of the turkey and the number of burners available. Other methods, such as pressure cooking or slow cooking, may require cutting the turkey into smaller pieces for more even cooking.

Planning ahead is essential when preparing a frozen turkey. The safest and easiest way to thaw a turkey is in the refrigerator. Allow approximately 24 hours of thawing time for every four to five pounds of turkey, though larger turkeys may require additional time. Place the turkey in a container to catch any juices and prevent cross-contamination.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's "Your Safe Thanksgiving Guide" provides helpful online tools for calculating both thawing and cooking times based on the size of the bird and cooking method selected.

Several food safety practices are especially important during the holiday season:

Wash hands frequently when handling food.

Avoid rinsing raw turkey or other meats prior to cooking. Washing poultry can spread bacteria to sinks, countertops, and nearby foods. Proper cooking will destroy harmful bacteria.

When roasting a turkey, maintain an oven temperature of at least 325 degrees Fahrenheit. Grilling and smoking methods should maintain temperatures between 225 and 300 degrees Fahrenheit.

Cook foods separately whenever possible for best quality and safety.

Use a food thermometer to verify the turkey reaches a minimum internal temperature of 165 degrees Fahrenheit.

Refrigerate leftovers within two hours and use them within four days, or freeze them for later use.

In addition to enjoying a festive meal, consider incorporating physical activity into your holiday traditions. Many families make time for an after-dinner walk, a backyard football game, or other outdoor activities. Staying active can be a fun way to spend time together and balance holiday indulgences.

Don't forget to drink plenty of water throughout the day. Staying hydrated may help manage feelings of hunger and support overall health.

This Thanksgiving, celebrate by expressing gratitude, enjoying a balanced meal, practicing safe food preparation, and spending quality time with family and friends. By focusing on these simple habits, you can help make the holiday both enjoyable and memorable.

For information about food safety and nutrition programming in the Southwind District, contact Sandy Haggard, Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health Agent, at SJHaggard@ksu.edu or 620-365-2242.

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