

Thanksgiving is approaching fast and keeping food safe at holiday parties and gatherings should be a priority so bacteria doesn't ruin the fun.

Many people celebrate the holidays with buffets, which require a lot of attention to ensure food safety, according to Julie Albrecht, University of Nebraska-Lincoln food safety specialist.

"Leaving food out all day is not a good idea," Albrecht said. "It's a way to invite foodborne illness to your guests."

Albrecht said food should not be left out for more than two hours at room temperature. Cooked foods need to be kept at 140 degrees or higher with slow cookers and warming trays, and cold foods need to stay at 40 degrees or lower with dishes in bowls of ice when on the buffet table.

"Keep desserts with dairy products refrigerated until serving time to prevent bacteria from multiplying," Albrecht said. "This includes eggnog, cheesecake, cream pies and cakes frosted with whipped-cream or cream-cheese."

Also, Albrecht said it is important to refrigerate foods quickly once they are no longer needed. She said it is best to divide larger portions of cooked foods into smaller portions before placing them in the refrigerator because they will keep cooler better.

It is common for dishes on buffets to become empty, but Albrecht said empty dishes should be replaced with clean ones instead of more food being added to an empty, used dish.

Another common piece in the holiday celebration puzzle is turkey.

"Cook your turkey to 165 degrees Fahrenheit, using a meat thermometer to check for doneness," Albrecht said.

Cooking time for turkey varies depending on its weight and whether or not it is stuffed. An 8 to 12 pound un-stuffed turkey can take between 2.5 and three hours and an 18 to 20 pound turkey between four and four -and-a-half hours to cook. Once it has reached the correct internal temperature and is finished cooking, the turkey should sit for 20 minutes before it is carved.

Typically people have turkey leftovers after a holiday feast, though there are limits on how long they stay safe.

"Put any cooked leftovers into the refrigerator as soon as possible, definitely within two hours of being served," Albrecht said. "Cut the meat off the bone so it is in smaller pieces and you don't put the whole, hot carcass in the refrigerator."

She said the turkey should be used within three to four days. Albrecht said there are many ways to use leftovers, including making soup from the turkey bones.