Taking the stress out of Christmas dinner – how to ensure a safe and happy festive period

Christmas can mean catering for more people and cooking larger quantities than normal. Don’t risk a bout of food poisoning spoiling the festive season—the Food Standards Agency has the following advice to ensure food is prepared and stored safely:

- Start thinking about the meals you’d like to eat over Christmas, thinking about what you’ll need to buy (and when) and writing a shopping list.
- The FSA has produced a downloadable festive meal planner which can help www.food.gov.uk/christmas
- Make sure your fridge is cold enough; it should be below 5°C.
- To prevent cross-contamination, store raw turkey and other raw food separately from cooked and ready to eat food, covered and chilled on the bottom shelf of the fridge.
- If you are using a frozen turkey, make sure you check how long it will take to defrost safely. If there aren’t defrosting instructions on the packaging, use the following times to work out roughly how long it will take to thaw your turkey.
  - In a fridge at 4°C (39°F), allow around 10-12 hours per kg, but remember that not all fridges will be this temperature.
  - In a cool room (below 17.5°C, 64°F), allow approximately three to four hours per kg, or longer if the room is particularly cold.
- To prevent the spread of food poisoning germs like campylobacter, make sure that you wash your hands thoroughly and everything that has touched your raw turkey (e.g. utensils and work surfaces) with hot soapy water followed by disinfectant.
- Don’t wash your raw turkey under the kitchen tap as this can splash germs around your kitchen.
- Make sure you allow time for your turkey to cook. Check it’s cooked thoroughly - there should be no pink meat in the thickest parts and it should be steaming hot with juices running clear. You can use a cooking thermometer (which is left in the turkey while it cooks); this should be placed in the thickest part of the turkey (this is between the breast and the thigh) from the start. You’ll know your turkey is cooked
when the thermometer has reached a minimum temperature of 70°C for 2 minutes.

- If you’ve got leftovers, you should cool them, then cover and ensure that they go in the fridge or freezer within 1-2 hours. Leftovers should be eaten or frozen within two days (one day for rice dishes).
- If you make a new meal such as curry or casserole from the leftovers, then you can also freeze this, even if you are using turkey that was originally frozen.
- If you are having people over for buffets or parties make sure you only take food out of the fridge at the time when guests are ready to eat and only as much as you think you’ll use. Put food back in the fridge as soon as you can, ideally within an hour.
- Make sure that when you come to use frozen leftovers, you defrost them thoroughly in the fridge overnight or in a microwave (on defrost setting) and then reheat until steaming hot.

Dr Kevin Hargin, Head of Foodborne Disease at the Food Standards Agency, commented: “If you’ve got family over for Christmas, there’s a lot to think about – from present shopping to where everyone’s going to sleep. In that long list of things to consider, it’s very important that food safety isn’t forgotten about. Planning is key, so make sure you follow some straightforward steps to ensure Christmas this year isn’t remembered for all the wrong reasons.”