

Dining without disaster: Food safety expert offers tips for safely storing and reheating Thanksgiving leftovers

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Thanksgiving leftovers can be delicious, but not so much when those leftovers are left out, said a Kansas State University food safety expert. Bryan Severns, manager of food programs and services at Kansas State University Olathe, offers several storing and safety tips that are designed to keep Thanksgiving leftovers filled with flavor rather than a foodborne illness.

Use it or lose it

"One of the big problems I constantly see is that food sits out at room temperature all afternoon," Severns said. "When you're not keeping cooked food actively hot or cold, it's really only safe to sit out for about an hour — and that's pushing it." Instead, once cooked food cools down to a manageable temperature, such as under 90 degrees Fahrenheit, it should quickly be moved to the refrigerator, Severns said. A cold garage also can suffice in a pinch if you can protect the food from pests.

Stored food can be out of sight but not out of mind

Four, seven, four are the important numbers to remember when it comes to storing leftovers. On average, cooked vegetables last four to five days before they begin to break down. To get the most out of leftover cooked vegetables, Severns recommends refrigerating them in an uncovered container to quickly cool them. Before going to bed, seal the container with a lid or plastic wrap. Seven days is the rule of thumb for how long leftovers should remain in the refrigerator, Severns said. "Generally after seven days, you should toss anything," Severns said. "One of my bugaboos is that if you're going to save something, use it. If you don't think you'll use it after seven days, put it in the freezer or get rid of it. It becomes a health risk if you hang onto it." Once frozen, leftovers should be used within about four months, Severns said. After that length of time, frozen food begins to lose its quality. Sealing food with a food saver vacuuming system will extend its quality a few months. "Remember, you're putting food in the freezer for a short turnaround in consumption time, not to stockpile it for an apocalyptic event," Severns said. Additionally, Severns recommends dividing leftovers into meal-sized portions that can easily be reheated for a quick meal or frozen.

Reheats done right

Chances are when it comes to reheating leftovers in the microwave, millions of Americans microwave skills are not so hot. "Properly reheating leftovers is something most people have been doing wrong for years," Severns said. "While a cold turkey sandwich is fine, all other cooked food needs to be heated to 165 degrees Fahrenheit so that you kill the microorganisms that may have been growing on the food since it was refrigerated. That means if I want some green bean casserole, stuffing or gravy, they each need to reach 165 degrees to be safe." Severns recommends using a calibrated food thermometer to ensure that food reaches 165 degrees Fahrenheit when it's reheated.