

Cooking for crowds

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Preparing food for a banquet or church supper can be hectic. But if you are well organized and take precautionary measures (to prevent food poisoning), your meal is sure to be a crowd pleaser.

First, plan your menu, keeping in mind that you'll need adequate oven and refrigerator space. It is necessary to keep hot foods above 60 degrees Celsius (140 degrees Fahrenheit) and cold foods below four degrees Celsius (40 degrees Fahrenheit).

When purchasing the food, but only from a reputable grocer and check everything carefully. Never buy canned goods with bulges, dents or rust spots; frozen foods with a heavy frost build-up; foods normally refrigerated from an unrefrigerated counter; or cracked eggs.

Store everything as soon as possible. Do not leave foods that should be refrigerated at room temperature for longer than two hours.

Before storing, wrap all meats carefully to prevent the blood from dripping onto other foods. Store raw and cooked foods separately.

Just before preparing foods, wash all counters and tabletops. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.

If you have a cut, make sure it is covered with a bandage. If you feel ill, ask someone else to prepare the food.

Thaw all meats and poultry in the refrigerator. For faster thawing, thaw foods in cold water.

When cutting up meats and vegetables, use a plastic cutting board rather than a wooden one. Wooden boards are difficult to clean.

In fact, it's a good idea to have two cutting boards, one for cooked foods and another one for raw foods.

After cutting up raw meats and poultry, immediately wash the cutting board and knife thoroughly with hot, soapy water and bleach. Hot water alone will not kill bacteria.

When preparing large quantities of a recipe, prepare several small pans rather than one large one. The food will not only cook quicker, but will also chill faster.

Cook meats according to recommended cooking times. Never partially cook meats one day and complete the cooking the next day.

Vegetables should be cooked as close to serving time as possible to preserve nutrients, flavor and texture, but also to decrease the chances of bacterial growth.

Refrigerate sandwiches made with meats as soon as they are made.

Sandwiches made with ground or chopped fillings are more susceptible to contamination.

After cooking foods, cool them quickly in cold water and then refrigerate.

If meals are being served in buffet style, place foods in shallow pans and replenish the supply of food often. Try to keep hot foods covered and use a hot tray to keep them warm. Serve cold foods on a bed of ice. Make sure individual utensils are available for each food item.

Refrigerate leftovers within two hours after the guests have been served. If you're not sure how long the food has been at room temperature, throw it out.

