

How to Avoid Food-Borne Illnesses

Many churches host events that feature a buffet or a pot-luck meal. These events help parishioners make meaningful connections. They may also be how your church reaches out to underserved or vulnerable members in the community.

But if food is not handled properly, or if basic hygiene practices are not followed, certain types of bacteria could grow and germs could be spread and transmitted. To make sure no one leaves with a stomach bug, or with a cold or the flu, here are some basic but very important tips for food safety:

1. Keep it clean

The cardinal rule of food safety is to wash your hands, both before and during the cooking process, and also while serving. Use soap and rub your hands together vigorously for about the time it takes to sing the “Happy Birthday” song in your head. It is also important to wash your hands both before and after you handle any food, especially if you have been handling eggs, raw chicken, or meat of any kind. What can be equally important is to make sure that food is being served on clean plates and with clean utensils.

2. Keep the temperature consistent

Hot dishes should be served hot (140° F or higher) and cold food should be served cold (40° or colder).

Do not simply place warm food on a cold serving dish and allow it to cool and sit out. Use chafing dishes with sterno burners, electric warming trays, or crock pots to serve warm foods. Keep cold foods cold by filling serving trays with ice, then placing the dish that contains the cold food to be served in the ice.

3. Keep it fresh

Perhaps you have a long event planned and you want food to stay available throughout. But food should not sit out for longer than two hours. A smart way to avoid food spoiling and going to waste is to only put out smaller amounts of each dish. Once that smaller amount has been finished, bring out a fresh helping and serve it in a new, clean tray or container. And keep refrigerated any dishes that you plan on serving later in the day. If you are serving pre-packaged food, remember to check the “sell by” and “use by” dates before you put it out for consumption.

Sharing food with parishioners and community members is a wonderful way to nourish people – both in body and in spirit. When food is handled properly, there is far less chance of bacterial growth, and a far greater chance that everyone will leave the event healthy and happy.