



## Holiday Party Food – Is it Safe? ...For Real



**H**appy holidays everyone!!!! I know this is going to happen to lots of you this month... so, here's the scene. You get invited to your friend or auntie's holiday open house, on a Sunday from noon to 8 p.m. You show up mid-afternoon, and after visiting with friends or relatives for a few minutes, you head into the dining room, where there is an incredible array of foods. You eye the ham, salads, dips, and fruits and wonder what to try first.

Have you ever wondered about the safety of those foods sitting out all afternoon, with no temperature control? No Sterno cans and chafing dishes, no cold packs — the usual equipment we use in the food industry to keep our food safe while being held. Does the mantra “cold food cold, hot food hot” run through your mind as you check out auntie's food? It has been sitting out at room temperature, about 68 degrees F, for several hours now. You know that after four hours in the temperature danger zone — between 41 degrees F and 135 degrees F — the food may no longer be safe to eat because the number of bacteria will have grown high enough to potentially cause illness.

### Using time only as a guide

In your commercial food operation, time is used in combination with temperature to control bacterial growth or toxin production in foods that need time and temperature control (TCS foods) to prevent foodborne illness. Time as Public Health Control (TPHC) refers to using **time only** to monitor food, instead of both time and temperature. The temperature of the food is not taken into consideration since the focus is on time.

### According to the FDA, you can hold cold food without temperature control for up to six hours if you meet certain conditions:

- The food was held under refrigeration at 41 degrees F or below before it was set out
- Label the food with the time it was removed from refrigeration
- The food should not exceed 70 degrees F during service
- Serve or throw out the food within six hours

### For hot food, the guidelines are:

- The food should be 135 degrees F or above before setting it out
- Label the food with the time it must be thrown out
- Serve or throw out the food within four hours

### Notifying the health department

In a commercial operation, if you are going to hold food without temperature control, the health department needs to be notified in advance of your using this procedure, and you will need

to receive special permission to do this. You will need to add a page to your HACCP plan indicating how you are safely holding hot or cold food without temperature control. Your plan will also need complete tracking information to be able to prove to the health department that you are following guidelines correctly. Effective written procedures communicate what the task is, where the task will take place, how and when the task will be performed, and who will perform the task.

### To ensure compliance with TPHC requirements, written procedures may include the following:

- List what specific food will be held using TPHC and where each food will be held;
- If cooling food that is prepared, cooked, and refrigerated, describe how the food will be properly cooled;
- Describe how the container will be marked to show when food will be cooked, served, or discarded within four hours;
- Identify who is responsible for each task;
- Identify how the information will be monitored, recorded, and verified.

Remember, any food that is held without temperature control must be discarded at the appropriate time — it cannot be saved and reused. Note that if you serve a highly susceptible population, such as elderly clients in a nursing home, you cannot use time only as a public health control.

So what to do as you check out the food choices in your aunt's dining room? Think about the FDA guidelines and choose accordingly. Or ... arrive earlier at the party, when you know everything has been just put out, and temperature is not so much an issue. And carefully reconsider the offer of taking some of the left-overs home with you!

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