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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Handling Delicatessen Meats

You've probably read or heard about the periodic food poisoning outbreaks associated with delicatessen meats. Such incidents jeopardize consumer confidence in these products, and may translate into lower sales for you. You owe it to yourself and your customers to cook, store, handle, and serve your meats carefully to avoid bacterial contamination which may cause food poisoning.

Food poisoning organisms, such as salmonella, can grow and multiply on delicatessen meats even after cooking. So whether you cook the meat yourself or receive it precooked, you must take steps to ensure that the product is handled properly from receiving to serving.

Storage

Delicatessen meat and poultry products (roast beef, pastrami, cooked corned beef, smoked tongue, ham, and cooked chicken and turkey) are highly perishable. To avoid spoilage, they should be kept COLD, at or below 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4°C), or HOT, at or above 140 degrees F (60°C). To prevent microbial growth responsible for food poisoning, delicatessen meats or other cooked meat and poultry products should not be left at room temperature for more than 2 hours.

Remember -- you cannot see, smell, or taste the bacteria that cause food poisoning, so it is of utmost importance that you handle cooked delicatessen meat and poultry products carefully.

Purchases

Make sure meat or poultry arrives in a refrigerated delivery truck. Don't accept torn, broken, or damaged packages.

Display and Service

Display all delicatessen products in refrigerated or properly heated cases. Keep the doors closed when not in use. Do not leave products outside cases for long periods. Rotate products. Rotate stock so that the oldest delicatessen products are used first. Use clean utensils and slicers so that contamination is not spread from one product to another, or from a raw to a cooked product. Change uniforms or outer clothing and wash hands after handling raw products and before handling cooked products.

Preparation

If products are already precooked, refrigerate immediately or begin necessary heating for serving. If a product is uncooked, and you are cooking your own roast beef or other delicatessen meats, make sure you refrigerate the product properly until ready to cook.

You should have an accurate meat thermometer available at all times and should follow these specified temperatures:

Roast beef: Internal temperature of 145°F (63°C) in the thickest part of the meat, rare; 160°F (71°C), medium; and 170°F (77°C), well done.

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Ham: Internal temperature of 148°F (64°C) - 150°F (65°C).

Poultry: Minimum internal temperature of 160°F (71°C).

Poultry with Stuffing: 165°F (74°C).

Corned beef and tongue: Minimum internal temperature of 145°F (63°C).

If two or more roasts are being cooked at a time, they should not vary in weight by more than 2 pounds or by more than 2 inches at the thickest part. This is to assure uniform cooking of all pieces of meat. Roasts should not touch each other during cooking, and there should be no interruption in the cooking process.

When more than one roast is being cooked and the weight range is greater than 2 pounds, or the difference in thickness is more than 2 inches, the temperature of each roast should be checked to assure that the recommended internal temperature is reached.

Begin chilling cooked product immediately after cooking is completed. Cooling of this product should be accomplished as quickly as possible to a temperature of 45°F (7°C) for food safety purposes and to 40°F (4°C) for prolonged shelf life.

Remember, food poisoning organisms grow well on cooked product. So make sure your cooked meat is not contaminated through direct or indirect contact with raw products.

Keep It Clean!

Proper sanitation is critical. Clean kitchen equipment, work surfaces, and counters thoroughly before and after use. This includes food slicers. Display cases should be cleaned at least once a week -- even more often during warm weather.

Thoroughly wash hands before and after handling raw or cooked products. Wear protective clothing and gloves, but make sure they, too, stay clean. Do not take protective clothing from the food preparation area (where raw product is handled or cooked) to that part of the delicatessen where the cooked product is sold. Don't work in a food preparation area if you feel sick, have a respiratory problem, or have open sores or wounds on your body.

Remember

Food contaminated by food poisoning bacteria does not change in taste, odor, or flavor; so the presence of the organisms is not apparent.

Prevention is the main way to avoid food spoilage or food poisoning. You owe it to your customers and your business to cook and handle delicatessen meats properly.