

USDA urges ham safety at Easter

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Ever wonder how ham became the traditional meat for Easter dinner?

In the days before refrigeration, hogs were traditionally butchered in the fall. People did this so the meat could be cured over the cold winter months when spoilage was less likely.

The first hams were ready, then, in early spring. A welcome change from monotonous winter fare, ham was often the cook's choice for the Easter menu.

Calorie-conscious consumers are choosing ham for their menus, too, as they discover the new low-fat lines. Labeled 93 to 95 percent fatfree, these lean hams compare favorably to lean beef, says Betty Murphy, a nutritionist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service.

But for all its fine flavor, high nutritive value and — in the case of the lean hams — lower calories, ham is a delicate meat, according to FSIS chief of microbiology Ralph Johnston.

"Ham requires careful storage to protect its quality and flavor," Johnston said. "There can be problems, too, with food-borne illness, such as that caused by *Staphylococcus aureus*, a type of food poisoning which frequently strikes ham, and trichinosis, a rare parasitic disease people contract from eating undercooked pork.

"Here are some shopping, storing and cooking hints, to help you avoid these difficulties and keep this a ham-safe Easter," Johnston said.

SHOPPING: Lean, cured ham, taken from the hog's back leg, should be a deep rose or pink color, Johnston says. Look for a fine, firm, dry texture. The fat cover should be firm and white.

STORING: "This is critical," Johnston says. "Place ham in the refrigerator as soon as you get home. It will keep in its original wrapper about a week. Although pre-cooked, most canned hams and picnics — smaller hams from the hog's front leg — must also be refrigerated.

Leftover cooked ham must be tightly wrapped or covered and refrigerated within 1 to 2 hours after cooking. It will keep about 4 to 5 days.

Johnston says if you have a lot of ham left after your dinner and you need to freeze it, wrap it well in freezer foil and store it at 0 degrees Fahrenheit or lower. Because ham tends to lose flavor and texture in the freezer, however, you may not want to keep it frozen for over two months.

COOKING: Fresh ham must be cooked to an internal temperature of 170 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent trichinosis, a disease in which microscopic trichinae organisms, sometimes present in hogs, work their way into human

muscle tissue. While trichinosis is rare — only about 100 cases a year in the United States — it can be painful but is rarely fatal.

When cooking a fresh ham, use a meat thermometer. That's the only way you can be sure it has reached an internal temperature of 170 degrees F. For an accurate reading, insert the tip of the thermometer in the thickest part of the cut, not touching any bone or fat.

Fully cooked hams, however, prepared in accordance with USDA processing guidelines, are ready to eat without further cooking. They have been specially processed to kill trichinae.

STAPH PREVENTION: "Like

all meat," Johnston says, "ham frequently contains some bacteria. *Staphylococcus aureus* or 'staph' is the villain in most ham-related illness.

"Staph, which causes symptoms similar to intestinal flu, can begin to multiply and produce a toxin or poison when you leave raw or cooked ham at room temperature too long — toxin production jumps dramatically at the upper end of the 45-115 degree F. range in which staph grow.

"Staph is particularly troublesome since you can't smell, taste or see it in food, and, once the toxin is formed, no amount of cooking can destroy it."

Prevention, then, is the best approach:

— Don't leave ham at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Keep it cold — 40 degrees F. or lower in the refrigerator — or hot — 140 degrees F. or higher for re-heating.

— People with colds and sinus infections are prime staph spreaders, so use tissues to cover coughs and sneezes.

— Use gloves to handle foods if you have any kind of skin cut or infection on your hands.

— Wash utensils before basting or slicing ham.

— Keep pets, also potential staph carriers, and their belongings out of the kitchen. After you play with pets, wash your hands before you prepare food.



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— NOTICE —

The Central Tractor Ad that appeared in the March 26 issue contained the following errors: The Latex Barn & Fence Paint listed at \$33.99 should have been \$34.99 and the Oil Base Barn & Fence Paint listed at \$34.99 should have been \$49.99.

Lancaster Farming apologizes for these errors and the confusion it has caused.

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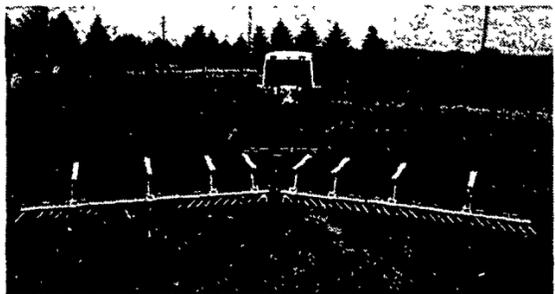
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