



PhotoDisc

Hock Locks and Other Accoutrements

*S*ay, what's this plastic thing holding the legs together on our turkey? Won't it melt if we put it in the oven?" asks a confused cook. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has the answer to this and other food safety questions about meat and poultry.

"It's a hock lock," answers the technical information specialist in Washington, DC, answering the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline's toll-free number at 1 (888) MPHOTline (888-674-6854).

"A what?" the caller responds.

"A hock lock secures the hind legs — or hock — of a chicken or turkey. It can be made of heat-resistant nylon or metal, and it's perfectly safe to leave it in the bird while it roasts. However," the Hotline specialist goes on, "it's more difficult to get a bird done evenly, especially in the leg joints, if the legs are locked or trussed together."

Hock locks are just one of the many functional items - made from a variety of plastics, metal, paper, and cotton - that producers may use on their products. Establishments must have on file documentation that the materials are safe for the intended or expected use with meat and poultry.

However, sometimes cooks use them in ways other than intended by the manufacturer. By mistake, consumers have left the paper- or plastic-wrapped giblets inside the turkey during cooking, neglected to take the plastic protector off ham bones, and "cooked" the absorbent paper-and-plastic pad which can be packaged under meat in foam trays.

Do these and other mistakes leave the food unsafe to eat? Here are the answers from the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline.

Leaving the paper- or plastic-wrapped giblets inside the turkey during cooking:

Some giblets are paper wrapped before being inserted into the poultry body cavity. In this case, there would be no concern if the giblets are accidentally cooked inside the bird to a safe temperature. If giblets were packed in a plastic bag, and the bag has been altered or melted by the cooking process, do not use the giblets or the poultry because harmful chemicals may have migrated into the surrounding meat. If the plastic bag was not altered, the giblets and poultry should be safe to use as long as the meat is fully cooked.

Neglecting to take the plastic protector off ham bones:

The plastic bone guard covering the exposed bone is used to keep the bone from breaking the outer wrap. If left on the meat during cooking, a 325 or 350 °F oven temperature may not melt the plastic but still give off an abnormal chemical odor or taste. Cutting away the meat around the exposed area will not necessarily solve this potential food safety problem because the penetration of the chemical into the meat will be unknown. **If meat is cooked in a closed container, the chemicals may penetrate the entire piece of meat. USDA advises not to eat the ham; discard it.**

“Cooking” the absorbent paper and plastic pad which can be packaged under meat in foam trays:

The absorbent pad is clearly not intended to be cooked; however, if this happens and the packaging materials remain unaltered (that is, do not melt or come apart), **the cooked meat will not pose an imminent health hazard. If the packaging materials have melted or changed shape in some other way, do not use the product.**

“To net or not” — leaving ham or turkey netting on during cooking:

Sometimes, when removing the packaging around a ham or turkey, consumers find an inner netting surrounding the meat product. Its purpose is to hold boned meat and poultry in a specific shape. The netting can be of a fabric, plastic, or plastic and rubber. The fabric netting can be used with

food. It may burn a bit if high heat is used, but there is no concern of transferring unsafe chemicals to the meat. Some plastics or plastic and rubber may be used and are made specifically for use in cooking. However, **the label must have specific cooking directions** for the meat to be safe to eat.

The use of a pop-up temperature indicator and double checking with a food thermometer:

Pop-up temperature indicators are constructed from a food-approved nylon. The indicator pops up when the food has reached the final temperature for safety and doneness. Pop-up temperature indicators have been produced since 1965 and are reliable to within 1 to 2 °F if accurately placed in the product. It is also suggested that the temperature be checked with a conventional thermometer in several places to insure safety.

Food Safety Questions?

Call the USDA Meat & Poultry Hotline

If you have a question about meat, poultry, or egg products, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at **1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854)**; TTY: 1-800-256-7072.



The Hotline is open year-round Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (English or Spanish). Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at www.fsis.usda.gov.

Send E-mail questions to MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Ask Karen!

FSIS' automated response system can provide food safety information 24/7



AskKaren.gov