

Health Matters

WINTER 2025 – Text Only Edition

Joyful Feasts, Safe Eats: The Island Holiday Food Success Guide

Winter is here—a time for cozy gatherings, twinkling lights, and incredible feasts! Whether you're serving up traditional turkey or fresh caught Dungeness crab, making sure our food is prepared and served safely is key to keeping the community well. Here's your islander's guide to safe eats and joyful feasts!

1. The “Chill Out” Rule: Keep it Cold and Clean.

Temperature control is vital, especially with our cool, damp climate.

- Thawing: Always thaw meats (or that big salmon!) in the fridge, or a cold water bath (changing the water frequently)—never on the counter.
- Storage: Check your fridge: keep it at 40°F (4°C) or below. A cold shed isn't a replacement for a properly chilled refrigerator.

2. Cook It Right: Check the Heat

A food thermometer is your most important kitchen tool, whether you're roasting a bird or steaming shellfish.

- Meat/Poultry: Cook all poultry, including your turkey, to a safe internal temperature of 165°F (74°C). This is also the temperature for reheating all leftovers.
- Seafood Safety: While shellfish should be cooked quickly, always ensure it is fully steamed or baked to a proper temperature if there's any question of safety. If you are doing your own foraging, make sure to check the latest shellfish advisories at www.islandcountywa.gov/644/Shellfish-Advisories.

3. Keep It Separate: Avoid Cross-Contamination

Bacteria spreads easily. Keep raw ingredients away from cooked dishes.

- Separate Boards: Use one cutting board for raw meats and fish, and a separate one for produce, bread, and cooked goods.

- **Wash Up:** Frequent handwashing with soap and warm water is nonnegotiable, especially after handling raw fish or poultry.
4. **The 2-Hour Rule:** Once food is served at the potluck or family dinner, it should not sit out at room temperature for more than two hours. Get those tasty leftovers wrapped up and into the fridge quickly to prevent spoilage.

Food Safety starts with Smart Choices

Buying food from people on social media, like on Facebook or Instagram, can be dangerous because sellers often don't follow important food safety rules. Regular restaurants and food businesses are checked by our Island County Food Safety team, but people selling homemade food online aren't. Because there is no check-up, you can't be sure the seller is cooking, cleaning, and storing the food safely.

They might not know how to stop things like raw chicken germs from getting onto other food (cross-contamination), or they might use ingredients that haven't been washed and prepped correctly. They may have animals in the kitchen or may be selling food that looks fresh but has in fact been left out for a long time.

This lack of safety could easily make you sick with food poisoning. Even if the food looks great in a photo, you are taking a risk with your health when you buy from an uninspected kitchen.

Winter Readiness on a Local Level

During a snowstorm, clearing major state highways, like Highway 20 on Whidbey Island, is a top priority. The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) is responsible for plowing Highway 20 and SR 532. Island County Public Works focuses on clearing county roads and tributary streets. You can view Priority Snow Removal Routes Maps here: www.islandcountywa.gov/744/Maintenance-Operations.

Plan Your Travel: If you must leave home, the state highways (Hwy 20 and SR 532) will likely be cleared first. Stick to these main routes whenever possible. If you plan to use public transportation, check Island Transit alerts first. During severe weather, buses often switch to "snow routes" and may not service unplowed tributary roads: www.islandtransit.org/Rider-Alert-Simplify-Transit.

Watch for Ice: Roads can be icy even without snow. Black ice often forms in the early morning hours. Drive slowly and give yourself plenty of extra travel time.

Wind Awareness: Our islands experience heavy winds that can make driving dangerous, particularly for larger vehicles. Be extra vigilant when crossing the Deception Pass Bridge and the Camano Gateway Bridge.

Treefall: High winds often mean downed trees.

Stay Updated: Always check local reports for road closures before you head out.

Pack a Winter Car Kit to Ensure your vehicle is ready for an emergency. Keep your gas tank full and pack a kit with:

- Warmth: Blankets, an extra hoodie, and a waterproof rain shell.
- Tools: Jumper cables, a flashlight with fresh batteries, and an ice scraper.
- Basics: Water and non-perishable snacks, as well as a travel first aid kit.

WSDOT Emergency Car Kit: wsdot.com/travel/real-time/mountainpasses/emergencycarkit.

Get Winter Ready: www.islandcountywa.gov/472/Winter-Storms.

Septic System Care for Winter

Tips to ensure your septic system stays in good shape for the Holidays and the rainy season.

1. Schedule a septic inspection.
2. Consider having your system pumped – this ensures your system can accommodate the increase in guests over the holidays.
3. Avoid letting fats, oils, and grease down the drain – install a sink drain strainer and wipe off dishes before washing.
4. Install water-tight tank risers – this prevents excess water from entering the system.

Protect Your Septic System from Excess Water:

Excess water being introduced into your septic system can result in problems, such as hydraulically overloading the system or sending solids out into the drainfield – leading to premature failure. Here are some tips to prevent excess water from entering the system.

- Divert roof downspouts away from septic components.
- Fix any leaky water fixtures inside the home.
- Space out the use of laundry, dishwashing, and showers.
- Install water-tight tank risers.

Water Check-Up: Keeping Tabs on our Surface Water Quality

The new water quality monitoring year started October 1! Learn how Surface Water Quality staff select sampling sites and work to protect water quality in Island County.

Why We Check the Water: Our program works for everyone in Island County. By checking the water quality of streams and creeks (surface water) we can:

- Look for dangers, as we take water samples to check for bacteria that could make people sick.
- Give warnings; if we find a problem, we send out letters to let people in the area know.
- Find the source by investigating to figure out where the pollution may be coming from.
- Fix problems by providing education on ways to clean up water quality once we narrow down the source.

This information is also used by other county groups to protect important areas. Keeping our water clean is essential for the health of our community and our natural resources.

Where We Check the Water: We choose our testing spots carefully to make the most of our time and money and monitor everything from small urban creeks to larger forested streams.

- **Core Sites:** These are the most important spots and are checked every month. They are usually where a stream flows into the Puget Sound. We picked these spots to represent areas with different uses, like farming, developed neighborhoods, or natural forests.
- **Rotational Sites:** We pick other spots randomly on a three-year cycle. We check each of these sites monthly for one year and then check them again three years later.

We make sure our sites include all the major streams and at least one spot in every main watershed (which is the area of land where all the water drains to a common point). The core sites are often in areas with steady water flow and next to sensitive spots like shellfish beds, public beaches, and salmon habitats.

Checking Our Changes: We also do a type of check called effectiveness monitoring. This means we test the surface water before and after we make big changes to the land to observe how the site transforms over time. For example, our staff recently checked the

water around places where old, narrow pipes (called culverts) were replaced with new ones that help fish swim through easier. During Water Year 2025, we checked conditions at culverts at Chapman Creek and Kristoferson Creek. We also test water quality near restoration areas like the one at Cornet Bay.

Work Together for Clean Water

All of us live in a watershed, and everything that happens upstream has an effect on water quality downstream. By working together to keep our surface waters clean, we help make a healthier environment not only for ourselves but for all the fish, animals, and plants that depend on these vital natural resources.

To find out more about how you can help protect our waters:

<https://ecology.wa.gov/water-shorelines/water-quality>

<https://whidbeywatersheds.org/>

<https://www.islandcountymrc.org/>

<https://www.islandcountywa.gov/186/Environmental-Health>

<https://www.wclt.org/>

ABCD: A new chapter for our Community Health program!

Smiley the Dentist Mouse arrives to delight children in both English & Spanish!

A heartwarming new children's book, published in both Spanish and English, introduces readers to a delightful character: Smiley, the Dentist Mouse. The book was created to celebrate and honor the Hispanic tradition of the Ratoncito Pérez who comes to collect milk teeth, a concept akin to the tooth fairy. By offering the story in both languages, the book will be a valuable resource for bilingual families, teaching children about oral hygiene while celebrating their rich heritage and cultural narratives.

The Island County Access to Baby and Child Dentistry program (ABCD) focuses on improving access to dental care for Medicaid-eligible children. Our goal is "First Tooth, First Birthday, First Dental Exam" by a dentist or a doctor, as recommended by the Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. For more information, go to: www.islandcountywa.gov/181/Access-to-Baby-Child-Dentistry.

The Economic Burden of Flu

When seasonal flu strikes, it does more than cause a few days of sickness; it creates a financial ripple effect that can impact household budgets. These costs can quickly snowball, adding up through lost paychecks, medical bills, emergency childcare, and all the unseen costs that come with upending daily life. In short, the flu can create an economic burden on families.

While getting vaccinated in September or October offers the best timing, it is never too late to get your shot. Flu activity often peaks later in the winter, so getting vaccinated now still provides essential protection and protect your pocketbook!

New VA Clinic & Comprehensive Support for Island County Veterans

Island County provides a network of services and resources for its large veteran population, focusing on both immediate financial relief and long-term health needs. The Island County Human Services department provides support for eligible veterans and their families for expenses like food, rent, utilities, and medical bills. They also provide direct assistance with filing Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims for compensation, healthcare, and pensions.

For hands-on claims help, accredited Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) offer free assistance. This support not only helps veterans navigate complex VA benefits but also provides support groups and transportation to off-island medical appointments. Adding to the local healthcare services, the new Oak Harbor VA Clinic (located within Naval Health Clinic Oak Harbor) provides comprehensive primary care services closer to home for Whidbey Island veterans.

Finally, partners like the Opportunity Council offer extensive support, including case management, rental and employment assistance, and help coordinating benefits, ensuring veterans have a wide safety net in Island County. Find contact information for the Human Services Veteran's Services team here: <https://www.islandcountywa.gov/200/Veterans-Assistance>.