



Heart to Heart

NEWS FROM ST. LUKE COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE

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NEW DOCS WELCOMED

Two new providers join St. Luke Community Healthcare team

ST. LUKE COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE HAS ADDED FAMILY PHYSICIAN DR. JUSTIN MORGAN to its medical staff. Dr. Morgan brings a broad range of rural health experience and a commitment to community-centered care.

Morgan grew up in Corvallis and attended the University of Montana, where he majored in biochemistry. He spent summers working as a commercial fisherman in Alaska — an experience he says deep-



Dr. Justin Morgan



Dr. Justin Morgan and his wife, Trish, recently moved to the area from a remote Alaskan island.

ened his respect for people who live and work in rural places.

“I chose healthcare as a way to help them,” he said. “While there are many benefits, there are also many perils to health and wellbeing that I wanted to improve.”

Before medical school, Morgan worked as a medical assistant in primary care. He later attended the University of Washington School of Medicine and completed much of his clinical training in Dillon. For the past 16 months, he has been practicing on a remote Alaskan island of about 3,000 residents.

“We were thrilled to welcome Dr.

Justin Morgan to St. Luke’s team this December at Ridgewater Clinic in Polson,” said St. Luke Community Healthcare Clinics Manager Kris Schallock. “His strong commitment to rural medicine and the experience he brings from practicing in a remote Alaskan village will make him an incredible asset to our patients. We especially love seeing fellow Montanans return home to share their talents and experiences with our community.”

Morgan’s clinical interests include obstetrics, pediatric mental health, metabolic health, sports medicine and

continued on next page

AWARD WINNING CARE

St. Luke earns national recognition for excellence in heart attack and stroke care

ST. LUKE COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE HAS BEEN NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED by the American Heart Association for its commitment to delivering high-quality, guideline-directed care for both stroke and heart attack patients, earning five prestigious Get With The Guidelines® awards in 2025. These recognitions reflect the hospital’s commitment to excellence, particularly in meeting the unique challenges of rural healthcare:

Gold Plus Award for Stroke Care, signifying excellence in consistently following the most up-to-date stroke treatment protocols.

Target: Stroke Honor Roll, highlighting rapid and effective stroke intervention.

Gold Award for Coronary Artery Disease (CAD), recognizing top-tier care for heart attack patients.

Bronze Award for Rural Stroke Care, acknowledging effective stroke treatment in a rural setting.

Bronze Award for Rural CAD Care, recognizing commitment to heart care for rural populations.

“Where you live should not determine if you live,” said Karen Joynt Maddox, M.D., MPH, co-author of the American Heart Association’s advisory on rural health. “Rural communities deserve high-quality cardiac and stroke care. St. Luke is recognized for consistently providing these patients with the care, guidance, and medical therapy they need to give them the best chance of survival.” The Get With The Guidelines® program supports hospitals in implementing research-based protocols to ensure patients receive timely, coordinated care. St. Luke’s awards reflect performance in several lifesaving areas:

Timely administration of aspirin and clot-busting medications
Rapid EKGs and transfers for heart attack patients
Consistent stroke response times

continued on next page

HONORING THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF ROBIN NELSON

OUR COMMUNITY IS MOURNING THE LOSS OF ROBIN NELSON, a woman whose life was defined by resilience, generosity, and unwavering dedication to the people around her. After a long and courageous battle with health challenges, Robin passed, leaving behind a legacy that will continue to shape our community owned hospital, our town, and the many lives she touched.

Robin faced her health struggles with remarkable grace and vigor. Those who knew her often spoke of her quiet strength and an inner resolve that allowed her not only to persevere through personal hardship but to pour her energy into serving others. Her ability to remain steadfast, compassionate, and engaged despite her own challenges made her an inspiration to many.

Her service to the St. Luke Community Healthcare stands as one of her many enduring contributions. Robin joined the Hospital Board of Directors in August of 1999, beginning more than two decades of dedicated leadership. Throughout her tenure, she approached every decision with thoughtfulness and integrity, always guided by a deep belief in the importance of community owned, accessible, highquality healthcare. Her colleagues remember her as a voice of reason, a champion for patients, and someone who always looked to better her community.

Robin and her husband Mark also served together on the St. Luke Foundation Board, further demonstrating their shared commitment to strengthening local healthcare. Their

partnership in service reflected their shared values: generosity, responsibility, and a belief in giving back. Whether helping guide fundraising efforts or supporting longterm planning, Robin brought insight, compassion, and a willingness to do the work that others often overlooked.

Her contributions extended far beyond the hospital walls. Robin was known throughout our community as someone



who gave freely of her time, money, and talents. She volunteered with numerous local organizations, always ready to lend a hand where it was needed most. Her volunteerism wasn’t about recognition; it was simply who she was, a person who believed deeply in community and lived that belief every day.

Professionally, Robin served for many years as a trusted insurance agent and business owner, building lasting relationships with clients who valued her honesty, reliability, and genuine care for their wellbeing.

Her work in the insurance field was another reflection of her character: she helped people navigate important decisions, often during stressful moments, with clarity and kindness.

In every role she held, whether a board member, volunteer, professional, or friend, Robin embodied service. She leaves behind a community made stronger by her presence and profoundly grateful for her contributions. Her legacy will continue in the community owned hospital she helped guide, the organizations she supported, and the countless individuals whose lives she touched.

Steve

dermatology. He is also trained in medical aesthetics and looks forward to offering those services to Mission Valley patients.

The physician-patient relationship is at the heart of Dr. Morgan’s approach to care. “I think one of the biggest strengths of family medicine is the chance to truly know your patients—who they are, what they value, and how to best support them,” he said. “When patients feel understood, they’re more comfortable sharing what’s really going on, and that trust helps me provide better care.”

“Family doctors can meet most of a patient’s needs in one place, and I believe we’re uniquely positioned to rebuild trust in science and medicine, especially after the strain the COVID pandemic placed on those relationships,” he added.

Morgan said he has always viewed the Mission Valley as one of the most beautiful places in Montana and is eager to make his home there.

“My wife and I are excited to live among the Salish and Kootenai people on their land and to learn more about their history and culture,” he said. “After living in Alaska, being close to water again helps us feel right at home.”

Outside of medicine, Morgan enjoys skiing, hiking, rock climbing, rafting, cycling, skating, camping, playing board games and getting to know the communities he serves.

Joining the St. Luke staff aligns with his philosophy of rural, relationship-based care. “I love that family medicine is not just getting to know my patients, but getting to watch them thrive in their communities,” he said. “My approach to health-care is to embrace becoming part of the community I’m serving—to live alongside

the people I care for and to understand the world they’re living in.”

To schedule an appointment with Dr. Morgan, call the St. Luke Community Clinic-Ridgewater in Polson at 406-883-3737.

St. Luke Community Healthcare is also proud to welcome board-certified Family Physician Dr. Alex Hetrick to their care team.

With training in full-spectrum care and a passion for serving patients of all ages, Dr. Hetrick brings a warm, whole-person approach to his practice. He looks forward to engaging with the community and putting down roots in the area while meeting new patients and learning about their lives.

“During medical school I had extreme difficulty choosing just one specialty—everything interested me,” he said. “Family medicine allowed me to do it all. I get to care for patients across ages and backgrounds and support a wide range of health concerns, which keeps my practice dynamic and fulfilling. Whenever I establish care with an entire family—from infants to grandparents—it reminds me why I chose this field. That continuity across generations is incredibly meaningful.”

He views his role with his patients as one of a trusted partner in health. “I offer a comprehensive range of services and try to meet patients where they are. Listening closely, understanding their goals, and collaborating on care plans builds trust over time,” he said. “I start by giving them space to share their concerns in their own words. If not everything fits into one visit, we prioritize together and plan a follow-up so nothing gets missed.”

“I see myself as a professional advice-giver and patients as the decision-makers,” Dr. Hetrick continued. “We build care plans together that fit their



Dr. Alex Hetrick

schedules and real-life circumstances, which helps ensure goals are achievable.”

He subscribes to a whole-person care model by seeing each medical concern in the context of a patient’s life - their work, home environment, responsibilities, stressors and joys. “All of that context helps me not only address the issue at hand but also support their broader health goals,” he said.

He explains complex conditions or care plans to patients by connecting medical concepts to everyday life.

“I do a lot of DIY house projects, landscaping, and farm work, so I tend to use analogies from those worlds. I also draw pictures during visits to help make things clearer,” he said.

He also works to ensure his patients receive safe, effective care as close to home

HEALTH WATCH

For those experiencing suicidal thoughts, or know someone who is, ***please reach out.***

1-800-273-8255 / Text MT to 741-741

SuicidePreventionLifeline.org

as possible. “When a concern falls outside my scope, I coordinate with community resources, specialists, or telemedicine consults to reduce travel and keep care seamless,” he said.

A proponent of clear, direct communication, Dr. Hetrick contributes to that culture by regularly asking colleagues for feedback and looking for ways to improve teamwork. He hopes his patients find him easy to talk to, and that they feel heard as he seeks to help them progress in their personal health goals through compassionate, comprehensive care.

Outside of work, Dr. Hetrick enjoys exploring Montana’s backcountry or diving into one of the many house or landscaping projects he has underway.

To schedule an appointment with Dr. Hetrick, please call St. Luke Community Clinic - Ronan at 406-676-3600.

“These awards speak to the dedication and collaboration of our entire team.”

- Stephanie Prentice, St. Luke Community Healthcare
Emergency Department Manager

award winning care (from page 1)

and outcomes

Continued care coordination and follow-up support

“These awards speak to the dedication and collaboration of our entire team,” said Stephanie Prentice, Emergency Department Manager at St. Luke. “We may be a small hospital, but we bring big expertise to the table — and every decision we make is focused on giving our patients the best possible chance of survival and recovery, right here in their own community.” “We are proud that our rural team is being recognized nationally for meeting — and often exceeding — standards of care,” added Abigail Byers, Director of Nursing Services at St. Luke. “From limited transport times to staffing realities, rural hospitals face significant hurdles. These awards demonstrate that we’re overcoming those challenges to deliver exceptional care close to home.”

Each year, over 1 million Americans are hospitalized with acute coronary syndrome, including the most dangerous form: ST-elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI). Similarly, rapid stroke care remains a national priority, as timely treatment can prevent long-term disability or death. These awards affirm St. Luke’s readiness and dedication in both areas.



St. Luke Community Healthcare received multiple community health awards in 2025.

Pictured in photos above and at left are: ED Ward Clerk Nick Burns, ER Physician Dr. Claire Raines, Director of Nursing Abigail Byers, RN, ER Nurse Rachel Shoemake, RN, COO Devin Huntley, CEO Steve Todd and Quality Improvement Manager Katie Harding.

FOUNDATION NEWS: Let’s partner to keep community-rooted healthcare strong

AS WE STEP INTO 2026 AND A FRESH NEW YEAR, I’m filled with gratitude and excitement for what lies ahead. After my first year in this role, one thing is absolutely clear: the Mission Valley’s commitment to caring for one another is the foundation that keeps St. Luke strong and proudly community



Tammy Campbell

owned after 72 years.

While many hospitals across Montana have joined large corporate networks, St. Luke continues to remain independent, guided by local needs and local decision-making. That independence allows us to respond quickly as our community grows, to expand services identified through our health needs assessments, and to ensure care stays close to home. And though we are independent, we are never isolated. We collaborate with community hospitals statewide to

enhance quality, access, and affordability.

As we look ahead, I invite you to join us in building the future of local healthcare. Your support of the St. Luke Community Healthcare Foundation helps ensure that exceptional, compassionate care remains available for every friend, neighbor, and family in the Mission Valley for generations to come. Together, we can strengthen community-rooted healthcare for the future, please reach out to learn how we can partner in this important work.

MENTAL HEALTH MOMENT

Winter Blues vs. Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

by Rachel Harriman, LCPC, ACLC

FEELING SLUGGISH, UNMOTIVATED, OR A LITTLE DOWN DURING THE WINTER MONTHS IS COMMON. Shorter days, colder weather, and less time outdoors can all take a toll on our mood and energy levels. For many people, these seasonal changes result in what’s often called the “winter blues.”

If you’re noticing more than just a mild slump, there are several simple steps you can try at home to support your mental and physical well-being during the winter months:

- Open curtains or blinds to let in natural light.
- Get 10–30 minutes of outdoor movement most mornings.
- Stick to a consistent sleep schedule—aim for the same bedtime and wake-up time each day.
- Eat foods rich in vitamin D.
- Use a “happy light” or sunrise simulator for 5–60 minutes in the morning to help reset your body’s internal clock.

(Do not use light therapy if you have bipolar disorder without consulting your physician.)

While these strategies can be helpful, it’s important to pay attention to how you’re feeling over time. If symptoms begin to interfere with daily life, it may be more than



Unlike holiday stress or seasonal busyness, SAD is linked to changes in your body’s circadian rhythm caused by reduced daylight hours.

the typical winter blues.

Seasonal affective disorder (SAD) is a form of depression that causes more significant and persistent symptoms, such as:

- Sleeping too much or struggling to get out of bed
- Chronic fatigue or low energy
- Loss of interest in favorite activities
- Strong cravings for carbohydrates and possible weight gain

For SAD to be diagnosed, these symptoms usually last for four to five months and recur for at least two consecutive years. Unlike holiday stress or seasonal busyness, SAD is linked to changes in your body’s circadian rhythm caused by reduced daylight hours.

If your symptoms continue or worsen despite trying at-home strategies, please reach out to your primary care physician for support. Early management can make a meaningful difference in improving mood, energy, and overall well-being throughout the winter season.

Preventing winter slips, trips, and falls: staying safe on icy ground

AS WINTER SETTLES OVER MONTANA, icy sidewalks, parking lots, and entryways can turn routine steps into potential hazards. Each year, falls caused by slippery conditions send thousands to emergency departments with injuries ranging from bruises to broken bones and head trauma. While the risk may feel unavoidable in our cold climate, most slip-and-fall incidents are preventable with a few simple precautions.

Start by planning ahead. Wear sturdy, slip-resistant footwear with good traction, and take small, deliberate steps when walking across icy or wet surfaces. Use handrails whenever available and keep your hands free to maintain balance — carrying heavy bags or keeping hands in pockets increases the risk of falling. Before entering buildings, wipe your shoes thoroughly to remove moisture that can make indoor floors slick.

Workplaces and public facilities also play a critical role in prevention. Regularly clearing ice and snow, placing non-slip mats at entrances, and promptly cleaning up water tracked indoors can



Remember to take your time, step carefully and stay alert to avoid falls in icy conditions.

significantly reduce accidents. If you notice a slippery spot, report it right away — safety is everyone’s responsibility.

At St. Luke, our Emergency Department team is here to help keep you and your loved ones safe this winter. We’re staffed 24/7 with board-certified physicians and skilled caregivers, ready to provide expert care when you need it most. But we’d rather help you prevent an injury than treat one — so take your time, step carefully, and stay alert. To learn more about St. Luke’s Emergency Department, visit stlukehealthcare.org/emergency-room.

PROVIDER DIRECTORY

St. Luke Community Clinic – Ronan Family Medicine and Obstetrics 406-676-3600 Joanna Billings, DO John Foster, MD Alex Hetrick, DO Caitlin Hickok, FNP Jay Perret, DO Megan Vigil, MD Peggy Martino, NP-C Katherine Mitchell, NP-C Stacey Burdett, NP											
St. Luke Community Clinic – Ridgewater Family Medicine and Obstetrics 406-883-3737 Kelli Larson, DO Justin Morgan, MD Mike Schallock, PA-C Jamie Engeldrum, PA-C Katie Troxel, DNP, FNP-C											
St. Luke Community Clinic – Southshore Family Medicine and Obstetrics 406-883-2555 Christina Marchion, MD Tanner Staley, PA-C											
St. Luke Community Clinic – St. Ignatius Family Medicine and Obstetrics 406-745-2781 Joanna Billings, DO Simon Crawford, PA-C Steve Shepro, PA-C Peggy Martino, NP-C Stacey Burdett, NP											
St. Luke Community Orthopedics 406-528-5580 Michael Dolecki, MD Robert Alfiero, PA-C											
St. Luke Community General Surgery 406-676-3600 Zach Hovorka, DO Jesse Alfiero, PA-C											
COUNSELING / PSYCHOLOGY 406-676-3600 <table><tr><td>Lyssa Haase, PsyD</td><td>Mikel Baxter, LCSW</td></tr><tr><td>Rick Greene, LCSW</td><td>Rachel Harriman, LCPC ACLC</td></tr></table>		Lyssa Haase, PsyD	Mikel Baxter, LCSW	Rick Greene, LCSW	Rachel Harriman, LCPC ACLC						
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EMERGENCY ROOM <table><tr><td>Abi Nutt, MD</td><td>Cara Harrop, MD</td></tr><tr><td>Isaac Billings, DO</td><td>Alex Nutt, MD</td></tr><tr><td>Ben Grass, MD</td><td>Claire Raines, MD</td></tr><tr><td>Mark Harding, MD</td><td>John VanArendonk, MD</td></tr><tr><td>Phillip Anuta, DO</td><td></td></tr></table>		Abi Nutt, MD	Cara Harrop, MD	Isaac Billings, DO	Alex Nutt, MD	Ben Grass, MD	Claire Raines, MD	Mark Harding, MD	John VanArendonk, MD	Phillip Anuta, DO	
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SPECIALIST DIRECTORY <table><tr><td>Cardiology 406-327-4646 Morgan Kellogg, MD Matt Weiss, MD Douglas Waldo, MD Robert Minor, MD</td><td>Radiology 406-676-4441 Northwest Imaging</td></tr><tr><td>Ear, Nose and Throat 406-752-8330 Kyle Tubbs, MD Kent Keele, DO</td><td>Sleep Medicine 406-676-4441 Kim Damrow, MD</td></tr><tr><td>Psychiatry 406-676-3600 Eleanore Hobbs, MD</td><td>Maternal Fetal Medicine 406-523-5650 M. Bardett Fausett, MD</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>Interventional Pain 406-676-4441 Michael Dumouchel, DNP, CRNA, NSPM-C Anthony Young, MAE, NSPM-F, CRNA</td></tr></table>		Cardiology 406-327-4646 Morgan Kellogg, MD Matt Weiss, MD Douglas Waldo, MD Robert Minor, MD	Radiology 406-676-4441 Northwest Imaging	Ear, Nose and Throat 406-752-8330 Kyle Tubbs, MD Kent Keele, DO	Sleep Medicine 406-676-4441 Kim Damrow, MD	Psychiatry 406-676-3600 Eleanore Hobbs, MD	Maternal Fetal Medicine 406-523-5650 M. Bardett Fausett, MD		Interventional Pain 406-676-4441 Michael Dumouchel, DNP, CRNA, NSPM-C Anthony Young, MAE, NSPM-F, CRNA		
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EMPLOYEE OF THE QUARTER

Quarter 4:
Randy Reinlasoder, Hospital-Acute Care

RANDY EXEMPLIFIES NURSING EXCELLENCE. His friendly and polite demeanor enhances the hospital environment and patient experience. Randy surpasses performance expectations with his readiness to assist, his team spirit, and effectiveness as a charge nurse. He truly cares and it shows!



ECF **PROFILE:** Bonnie Mutchler

BONNIE (HAINES) MUTCHLER WAS BORN ON APRIL 1, 1930, IN HELENA. The oldest of four siblings, Bonnie grew up helping care for her younger brother, Kim, and younger sister, Nan. When Bonnie was sixteen, her youngest sister, Debbie, was born. Responsible from a young age, Bonnie decided to host her own sweet sixteen party while her mother was in the hospital. She fondly recalls serving as hostess while her friends brought gag gifts for her April Fool’s Day birthday.

Growing up during the Great Depression meant Bonnie’s parents had to get creative to provide for their children. Her father was a “jack of all trades” who followed work wherever he could to keep the family afloat. His jobs included gold mining, farming, teaching, and even border patrol. Because of this, Bonnie recalls she was never in one school for longer than two and a half years—but she “saw some interesting places.” Her hometowns included Helena, MT, Havre, MT, and Dunseith, ND. She graduated from Sweet Grass, MT, in 1947, with just 24 students in her entire high school.

Bonnie’s mother kept house and raised the children, occasionally working as a substitute teacher. Once the children were older, she went on to become a full-time teacher. After high school, Bonnie moved temporarily to Missoula with her parents while her father worked on his teaching degree. She later moved to the Mission Valley to help at her aunt and uncle’s restaurant, where she met her husband, Earl. Bonnie liked how polite he was, even though he was “about half bashful.” Earl had just returned from two and a half years on an aircraft carrier during World War II.

The two were married on March 2, 1949, and lived together on the family farm for 65 years. On the farm, Earl and his brother raised dairy cows. When their barn burned down—destroying the milk equipment—they transitioned to beef cattle and grain and hay crops. Bonnie recalls her early efforts to help on the farm with humor. When they were first married, she hadn’t yet learned to drive. Earl wanted help towing a vehicle with the tractor, but after some frustration with her attempts, she got out of the tractor and walked away. “He must have found someone else to help,” she recalls with a laugh.

The couple went on to have a son, Les, in 1950 and a daughter, Kathy, in 1953. Bonnie says she was happy on the farm. When Les started school and Earl’s parents could watch Kathy one day a week, Bonnie worked at the old Pablo IGA store. She did this off and on for thirty-three years, helping with everything from checking to stocking and cleaning. She enjoyed meeting customers and working



Bonnie Mutchler

for a great boss. Bonnie also stayed very involved in her community. She served as a 4-H leader for her children, a Cub Scout mother, a fair board member, and Treasurer of Ronan Christian Church. As she puts it, “I just helped wherever.”

Earl had his first stroke in 2008 and a second, massive stroke in 2010, after which he moved to the St. Luke Community Extended Care Facility. Bonnie recalls that he was in a coma for three days, and when he awoke, his mind was “still back in the 1940s. He thought I was his mom most of the time.” Occasionally, however, he experienced moments of lucidity—moments that the family deeply cherished. Bonnie took comfort in knowing he was well cared for at the ECF. Earl passed away thirteen years ago.

Given her positive experience with Earl’s care, when Bonnie later experienced some health decline herself, she knew St. Luke was where she wanted to be. She says she hasn’t had a single regret. “I’ve had a ball here!” Bonnie shares that she’s happy with the care she receives, enjoys the residents and staff, and loves participating in activities. “After a life of waiting on others, it’s kind of nice to be waited on,” she says with a small smile. Bonnie will be closer to 100 than 90 in just a few months, yet she has remained incredibly youthful and productive. During her time at the ECF, she has personally crocheted and gifted 245 butterflies—and in fact, she gifted one to her interviewer during her interview, marking her 246th! She also enjoys puzzles, knitting, and having lunch at the Ronan Senior Citizens Center three times a week, where her granddaughter works.

Bonnie is proud of her family, which includes six grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. When asked what words of wisdom she would share with her community, she replies humbly, “Well, I’m no Pollyanna, but I’ve always tried to look on the happy side. It’s made my life so much easier!” With that simple credo, Bonnie continues to share happiness wherever she goes.

NUTRITION **CORNER**



Healthy & Safe Food Practices:
A Dietitian’s Guide to Keeping
Your Kitchen Nourishing & Safe

KEEPING FOOD SAFE IS ONE OF THE SIMPLEST—AND MOST POWERFUL—WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR HEALTH. Whether you’re cooking for your family, meal-prepping for the week, or storing leftovers, a few essential habits can prevent food-borne illness and keep your meals delicious and nutritious. Here’s what to focus on:

1. Handwashing: A Small Step With Big Impact

From a nutrition perspective, I see handwashing as part of the foundation for a healthy eating pattern. We work hard to choose nourishing foods—so it’s worth protecting them from contamination.

- When to wash your hands:
 - Before preparing or eating food
 - After handling raw meat, eggs, or seafood
 - After touching pets
 - After using the restroom
 - After coughing, sneezing, or touching your face
 - After handling garbage
- How to wash:
 - Wet your hands with clean, warm water.
 - Apply soap and scrub for at least 20 seconds (hum “Happy Birthday” twice!).
 - Clean between fingers, under nails, and the backs of hands.
 - Rinse thoroughly and dry with a clean towel or air dryer.

2. Preventing Cross-Contamination: Keep Foods Separate

Cross-contamination happens when harmful germs from one food spread to another. This is especially important when handling raw poultry, meat, eggs, and seafood.

- Best practices:
 - Designate separate cutting boards: one for raw proteins, one for produce.
 - Wash knives, boards, counters, and hands after working with raw ingredients.

Store raw meats on the bottom shelf of the fridge to prevent drips onto other foods.

Use clean plates for cooked foods—never reuse a plate that held raw meat or seafood.

Even in plant-forward kitchens, cross-contamination still exists—think raw eggs, unwashed produce, or allergens. Staying mindful keeps your food both safe and enjoyable.

3. Smart Food Storage: Protecting Flavor, Nutrition & Safety

Proper storage is something I emphasize because it doesn’t just reduce illness risk—it also protects nutrients and prevents food waste, which saves money and supports sustainability.

Refrigeration Tips

Keep your fridge at 40°F (4°C) or below.

Don’t over-pack—air circulation keeps food evenly chilled.

Store cut produce in airtight containers.

Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours of cooking (1 hour if it’s hot outside).

Rotate foods: first in, first out.

Freezer Tips

Keep your freezer at 0°F (-18°C) or below.

Label and date items.

Wrap foods tightly to prevent freezer burn.

Rotate foods: first in, first out.

4. Proper Cooking Temperatures: Your Thermometer Is Your Friend

If I could put one tool into every kitchen, it would be a food thermometer. It removes guesswork and keeps meals safe—especially important for young kids, older adults, pregnant individuals, and anyone with a chronic condition.

From a nutrition standpoint, cooking to proper temperatures ensures that pathogens are eliminated, food texture improves, and nutrients aren’t unnecessarily lost from overcooking.

Know the “danger zone”: 40°F–140°F (4°C–60°C). Bacteria grow rapidly within this range. Below are key temperatures to remember:

All Poultry: 165°F

Ground meats, excluding poultry: 160°F

Beef, pork, lamb (whole cuts): 145°F

Fish: 145°F

Leftovers: 165°F

Holding and Reheating

Keep hot foods at 140°F or above until serving.

Reheat leftovers to 165°F.

Cool large batches of food in shallow containers to speed chilling.

Dietitian tip: Get comfortable using a thermometer on everyday meals—not just holiday turkeys. Testing temperatures on leftovers, soups, plant-based proteins, and casseroles is a great habit.

Final Dietitian Message

Food safety isn’t meant to feel intimidating—it’s meant to empower you. By washing your hands regularly, preventing cross-contamination, storing foods properly, and cooking to safe temperatures, you can significantly reduce your risk of illness and keep your kitchen a healthy, happy place. A little care goes a long way in protecting yourself and the people you feed.



MacKenzie Stark, RDN



www.stlukehealthcare.org

IN RONAN:
St. Luke Community Hospital
St. Luke Community Convenient Care
St. Luke Community Extended Care
St. Luke Community Oxygen & Medical Equipment
St. Luke Community Hearing Center
St. Luke Community Healthcare Foundation
107 6th Ave. SW 406-676-4441
St. Luke Community Clinic – Ronan 406-676-3600
St. Luke Orthopedic Clinic 406-528-5580
St. Luke General Surgery 406-676-3600
126 6th Ave. SW

IN POLSON:
St. Luke Community Clinic – Ridgewater 406-883-3737
St. Luke Community Clinic – Ridgewater PT 406-883-2666
107 Ridgewater Drive
St. Luke Community Clinic – Southshore 406-883-2555
104 Rufus Lane

IN ST. IGNATIUS:
St. Luke Community Clinic – St. Ignatius 406-745-2781
330 Six Tracts Way

*The Heart of Healthcare
in the Mission Valley*

