

Turkey Basics: Safely Thaw, Prepare, Stuff and Cook



Whether you're a seasoned chef or a novice preparing your first holiday meal, be aware of safety issues when thawing, preparing, stuffing, and cooking your turkey.

When preparing a turkey, be aware of five main safety issues: thawing, preparing, stuffing, cooking, and storing leftovers.

Safe Thawing

Thawing turkeys must be kept at a safe temperature. The "danger zone" is between 40°F and 140°F — the temperature range where foodborne bacteria multiply rapidly. While frozen, a turkey is safe indefinitely, but as soon as it begins to thaw, bacteria that may have been present before freezing can begin to grow again. There are three safe ways to thaw turkey and food in general: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in a microwave oven.

Refrigerator Thawing: The refrigerator should be set at 40 °F or below. Plan ahead to allow approximately 24 hours for each 4 to 5 pounds. Place the turkey in a container to prevent the juices from dripping on other foods. A thawed turkey can remain in the refrigerator for 1 or 2 days before cooking. *Foods thawed in the refrigerator can be refrozen without cooking but there may be some loss of quality.*

Cold Water Thawing: First be sure the turkey is in a leak-proof plastic bag to prevent cross-contamination and to prevent the turkey from absorbing water, resulting in a watery product. Submerge the wrapped turkey in cold tap water. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed, allowing 30 minutes per pound bird. Cook the turkey immediately after it is thawed. After cooking, meat from the turkey can be refrozen.

Microwave Thawing: Follow the microwave oven manufacturer's instruction when defrosting a turkey. Plan to cook it immediately after thawing because some areas of the food may become warm and begin to cook during microwaving.

Remember to remove the neck and bag of giblets from inside the turkey before stuffing or cooking!

Safe Preparation

Bacteria present on raw poultry can contaminate your hands, utensils, and work surfaces as you prepare the turkey. If these areas are not cleaned thoroughly before working with other foods, bacteria from the raw poultry can then be transferred to other foods. After working with raw poultry, always wash your hands, utensils, and work surfaces before they touch other foods. Try to use non-porous work surfaces, when possible.

Safe Stuffing

For optimal safety and uniform doneness, cook the stuffing outside the turkey in a casserole dish. However, if you place stuffing inside the turkey, do so just before cooking, and use a food thermometer. Make sure the center of the stuffing reaches a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F. Bacteria can survive in stuffing that has not reached 165°F, possibly resulting in foodborne illness.

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Safe Cooking

Do not partially cook the bird the day before and then finish it on the day it is to be served. Interrupted cooking increases the chance of bacterial growth to infectious levels.

Set the oven temperature no lower than 325°F and be sure the turkey is completely thawed. Rinse the bird in and out with cool running water, using paper towels to dry surfaces and the body cavity before proceeding to stuff/roast. Place turkey breast-side up on a flat wire rack in a shallow roasting pan 2 to 2-1/2 inches deep. Check the internal temperature at the center of the stuffing and meaty portion of the breast, thigh, and wing joint using a food thermometer. Cooking times will vary, although a general rule of thumb at this oven temperature is shown on the below table. The food thermometer must reach a safe minimum internal temperature of 165°F; **do not** rely on a “pop-up” indicator on the turkey. Let the turkey rest 20 minutes before removing all stuffing from the cavity and carving the meat.

APPROXIMATE COOKING TIMES

<u>Size of Turkey</u>	<u>Cooking Time</u>	<u>Size of Turkey</u>	<u>Cooking Time</u>
<i>Unstuffed</i>		<i>Stuffed</i>	
8 to 12 pounds	2 ¾ to 3 hours	8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3 ½ hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3¾ hours	12 to 14 pounds	3 ½ to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3 ¾ to 4 ¼ hours	14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4 ¼ hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 ¼ to 4 ½ hours	18 to 20 pounds	4 ¼ to 4 ¾ hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 ½ to 5 hours	20 to 24 pounds	4 ¾ to 5 ¼ hours

Safe Handling of Leftovers

Cut leftover turkey into small pieces, or slice. Refrigerate stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers within 2 hours of cooking. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within 3 to 4 days, and gravy within 1 to 2 days. Gravy should be reheated to a boil and leftovers, if heated, should be thoroughly reheated to 165° F.

Following these guidelines can help you prepare a safe holiday dinner that everyone will enjoy.

Sources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/features/turkeytime/>

<http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/news/1999/0457-99.htm>

