

Let's Talk Turkey

All poultry, including turkey, is highly perishable. To ensure a safe product, proper handling and storage are important. Buy poultry only from freezer, refrigerator or chill cases. What are recommended ways of handling turkey? Let's consider some questions frequently asked about preparing, cooking and keeping turkeys.

What Is The Quickest Method of Thawing A Turkey?

If you have a big bird, face it - any method takes time. Most food spoilage organisms grow rapidly between 40 degrees F and 140 degrees F . Temperatures between 60 degrees F and 120 degrees F are in the danger zone, allowing very rapid bacterial growth. If food is in this temperature range for more than 2 hours, enough bacteria could grow and survive to cause illness. Three suggested methods are safe for thawing turkeys. In each case, turkeys are thawed until pliable. At this point, remove neck and giblets. Cook neck and giblets promptly and refrigerate. Cook turkey as soon as thawed.

Methods:

1. **Thaw in refrigerator** in the original wrap. Place on a tray or platter to catch drip. Turkeys 8 to 12 pounds take about 1 to 2 days to thaw; 12 to 16 pounds take about 2 to 3 days; 16 to 20 pounds take 3 to 4 days; 20 pounds or over, take 4 to 5 days. Pieces of large turkey, such as half, quarter, or half breast, require 1 to 2 days to defrost.
2. **Thaw in cold water.** Place frozen turkey in its watertight wrap in **cold** water. Change water frequently to hasten thawing. The USDA recommends changing water every 30 minutes. As a guide, it takes about 30 minutes per pound to thaw in cold water. Thawed turkey may stay in the refrigerator 1 - 2 days. A combination of methods 1 and 2 may be used. Partly thaw in refrigerator, then complete in cold water.
3. **Thaw in a microwave oven.** Because microwave ovens vary, check the manufacturer's instructions for the power level for defrosting and the minutes per pound for thawing.

To help you remember when to thaw the turkey, print a large, clear note to remind you. Decide on the thawing method you'll use; put the starting day, date and time (if necessary) on the note. Put it where you're most likely to see it when needed. Don't take chances with your family's and friends' health by taking shortcuts which may let disease-producing bacteria grow.

Do Turkeys Always Have To Be Thawed Before Cooking?

No. Whole poultry frozen without giblets, or frozen poultry parts can be roasted, fried, braised or stewed without thawing. Allow at least one and a half times the usual cooking time recommended for unfrozen or thawed turkey of the same shape and weight.

NEVER thaw commercially frozen stuffed turkey before cooking. Such birds are cooked from the frozen state. Follow directions on the label for time, temperature and method of cooking.

How Long Must I Roast Turkeys, and At What Temperature?

Preheat oven to 325 degrees F . A meat thermometer is your best bet to determine doneness. Insert thermometer in the center of the inner thigh; the thermometer should not touch bone. Turkey is done when temperature reaches 180 degrees F to 185 degrees F . If bird is stuffed, check stuffing also with meat thermometer for doneness. Put the thermometer in the center of stuffing; it should register 165 degrees F .

Unstuffed turkeys may take slightly less time (about 1 to 3 minutes per pound). Cooking times below are based on chilled poultry which is not above 40 degrees F .

Turkey is roasted breast-side up, uncovered, in shallow roasting pan. If turkey browns early during roasting, cover breast and drumsticks lightly with aluminum foil.

Additional methods for cooking turkey include oven cooking bags, microwave ovens (for pieces only), outdoor grills and rotisserie. Follow directions provided by the manufacturer. Brown paper bags should not be used because of sanitary reasons and the possibilities of fire.

Timetable For Roasting Fresh Or Thawed Turkey Or Turkey Parts

These times are approximate and should always be used in conjunction with a properly placed thermometer. Oven temperature - 325 F.

Weight (pounds)	Unstuffed (hours)	Stuffed (hours)
4 to 6 (breasts)	1.5 to 2.25	Not applicable
6 to 8	2.25 to 3.25	3 to 3.5
8 to 12	2.75 to 3	3 to 3.5
12 to 14	3 to 3.75	3.5 to 4
14 to 18	3.75 to 4.5	4 to 4.25
18 to 20	4.25 to 4.5	4.25 to 4.75
20 - 24	4.5 to 5	4.75 to 5.25

After The Turkey Has Been Roasted, How Do I Keep The Meat Safe?

If turkey has been stuffed, remove every bit of stuffing as soon as possible after serving. Cool stuffing quickly, refrigerate and use within 1 to 2 days. If gravy was made, store it separately in refrigerator and use within 1 to 2 days. Reheat gravy or poultry broth to boiling before serving.

After serving turkey, quickly remove meat from bones, keeping in as large pieces as possible. Cool quickly. Store loosely wrapped in coldest part of refrigerator in shallow containers. Slice into serving size just before using. Use within 3 to 4 days and reheat to 165 degrees F.

Turkey meat may be held for a longer time if frozen. Cooked turkey slices or pieces may be held for 6 months if covered with broth or gravy; for 1 month if not covered with broth or gravy. Freezer temperature should not exceed 0 degrees F.

How Can I Use Turkey and Stuffing Leftovers?

The November and December issues of many magazines have many different recipes using cooked poultry. Why not start clipping interesting ones for your recipe file? Some general ideas for using leftover turkey include any dish using cooked poultry such as curries, casseroles, croquettes, salads (vegetable or fruit plus turkey pieces), sandwiches (hot or cold). Stuffing can be sliced and used in sandwiches, used in casseroles, or simply wrapped in aluminum foil and reheated.

Can I Partially Roast The Turkey One Day, Then Finish Cooking It The Next Day?

No. This is a dangerous practice since bacteria have an added chance to grow with such cooking. Turkey flesh would tend to be in the danger zone (60 degrees F - 120 degrees F) for more than 4 hours. If staphylococci, for example, are present, a toxin is produced, which causes one type of food poisoning. The delayed cooking mentioned would contribute to the danger.

Determine the time needed to roast turkey and add about 30 to 45 minutes. The bird is easier to carve if allowed to stand for this length of time after roasting. Complete roasting all at one time, even if it means setting our alarm clock to get you up earlier than usual.

Can Turkey Be Roasted At A Low Temperature All Night?

This, too, is a dangerous practice. the cooking temperature would not entirely allow for destruction of harmful bacteria and might well result in increased growth of microorganisms.

Is It All Right To Stuff Turkey The Night Before, Then Roast It Next Morning?

This is not a safe practice. The refrigerated, stuffed turkey would still be a potential hazard, possibly harboring food spoilage bacteria. If you make stuffing ahead, store it separately in the refrigerator. Stuff bird just before roasting. Fill body cavity and base of neck lightly; this allows room for stuffing to expand and heat to penetrate more readily.

References:

Poultry in Family Meals, G110, USDA
Keeping Food Safe to Eat, G162, USDA
How to Buy Poultry, G157, USDA

For more information about food safety, call your local Cooperative Extension office for the following publications:

* [Food Storage Chart](#)

* [Keep Food Safe](#)

* [Proper Hand-washing Techniques A Guide for Quantity Food Preparers](#)

New Castle County - 831-1239

Kent County - 697-4000

Sussex County - 856-7303

or the Foods Answer Line - 831-1239