



## Turkey 101: Thawing, Stuffing, Roasting and Storing

With the holiday season rapidly approaching, turkey is a popular choice for office and family gatherings. Whether you are cooking at home or buying a pre-cooked bird, these are helpful reminders for serving an appetizing and safe turkey.



At this time of the year, grocery stores have fresh turkeys in the refrigerator section or offer a bargain on frozen turkeys. You can avoid cross-contamination from raw poultry juices by making sure the turkey is not touching other foods. Use a separate bag for holding the bird while shopping and going home. Refrigerate the turkey in a pan on the lower shelf to prevent juices from dripping on other foods.

**Thawing.** If you are using a frozen bird, allow yourself enough time to thaw safely. As the turkey begins to defrost, any bacteria present **BEFORE** freezing can begin to grow. A frozen turkey left on the counter for more than two hours is risky. The outer layers of the food will be in “the Danger zone,” (between 40° F and 140° F), an ideal temperature for bacteria to grow. Here are three better options:

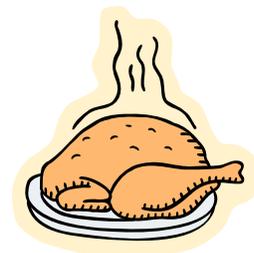
- **Refrigerator thawing:** Allowing 24 hours for every 5 pounds in a refrigerator set at 40°F. Keep in mind that even a turkey soaking in a brine (salt and water) solution needs to be kept refrigerated.
- **Cold water thawing:** First, be sure the food is in a leak-proof package. Immerse the turkey in cold tap water and allow 30 minutes per pound. Change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. Cook immediately.
- **Microwave thawing:** Follow the microwave manufacturer’s instruction when defrosting a turkey. Plan to cook immediately because some areas may become warm and begin to cook during microwave thawing.

**Stuffing and Cooking.** If stuffing is a must with your turkey, cooking in a separate casserole dish is ideal. If you are preparing stuffing in the turkey, fill the bird just before cooking. Use a meat thermometer to make sure the turkey **AND** stuffing is cooked to the proper temperature, 165° F.

- The wet and dry ingredients for the stuffing can be prepared ahead of time, chilled, and then mixed just before cooking.
- Stuff the cavity loosely- about  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of stuffing per pound of turkey. Stuffing should be moist, not dry, since heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment.



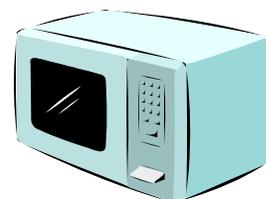
- Place the stuffed bird in the oven immediately. Set the oven temperature **no lower** than 325° F. Even if there is a “pop-up” indicator, use a meat thermometer to test for doneness. The innermost part of the thigh and the stuffing should reach **165° F**. The juices should run clear.
- For quality, let the turkey stand for 20 minutes to let juices set before removing all stuffing and carving.



A precooked turkey with the USDA or state mark of inspection is processed under controlled conditions. Follow package directions of reheating and storing. Similarly, for frozen turkey dinners that include side dishes, follow package directions for thawing, reheating, and storing.

Whether you are cooking yourself or ordering a pre-cooked dinner, do not leave foods out for more than 2 hours. Keep cold foods in the refrigerator until mealtime. Hot foods in oven safe containers may be held in the oven. Adjust the oven temperature to keep internal temperature at 140° F or higher. To prevent dryness, cover dishes with aluminum foil. If guests will not be arriving for several hours, you'll have a better quality product by refrigerating the turkey, stuffing, potatoes, gravy and vegetables in shallow dishes and reheating when guests arrive.

**Reheating and Leftovers.** Reheating a whole turkey is not recommended. Turkey may be sliced and served cold. If you prefer your turkey hot, reheat the turkey and other hot dishes to 165°F or until hot and steaming. Bring the gravy in a rolling boil. If reheating with a microwave, cover food and rotate dish to heat evenly.



What about the leftovers? Leftover turkey, gravy and stuffing make great sandwiches, casseroles, soups, and salads. Refrigerate leftover turkey and stuffing promptly in shallow containers. For best quality and safety, eat stuffing within 1 to 2 days and turkey within 3 to 4 days. If you know you won't be able to eat leftovers within this time frame, freeze them for future use. When frozen, turkey slices can be kept for up to 4 months, turkey with gravy or broth for 6 months, and stuffing and gravy for 1 month.

### **For more turkey information**

For additional assistance from the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-6854, speech & hearing impaired 1-800-256-7072 (TTY), email [mpholine@fsis.usda.gov](mailto:mpholine@fsis.usda.gov) or check the Food Safety Inspection Service website: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov)

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