

# Holiday Cooking: Keep it Safe!

Holidays present unique food safety challenges, so cooks should plan ahead to ensure that holiday foods are safe. Here are some tips to help prepare, cook, and store your holiday foods safely.

## Food Safety Tips

- ◆ **Clean:** Wash your hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before preparing food and wash food-contact surfaces often. Wash cutting boards, dishes, utensils and counter tops with hot soapy water after preparing each food item and before you go on to the next food.
- ◆ **Separate:** Don't cross-contaminate and let bacteria cross from one food product to another. This is especially true for raw meat, poultry, and seafood. Keep raw meats and their juices away from ready-to-eat foods such as uncooked fruits and vegetables.
- ◆ **Cook:** Cook foods to proper temperatures. Use a food thermometer, which measures the internal temperature of cooked meat, poultry, and egg dishes, to make sure that the food is cooked to a safe internal temperature.
- ◆ **Chill:** Refrigerate foods promptly. Cold temperatures keep most harmful bacteria from multiplying. Refrigerators should be set at 40°F and the freezer at 0°F. Refrigerator settings should be checked often with a thermometer.
- ◆ **Ill:** If you have been sick with diarrhea and vomiting, do not prepare food for at least 24 hours after your symptoms have stopped. Remember to also cover your cough and wash your hands before returning to food preparation.

## Turkey Tips

- ◆ **Plan Ahead** - Plan your menu several weeks before the holiday, including the type of turkey you are planning on serving. Fresh turkeys need to be cooked 1-2 days after purchase, while frozen turkeys can be purchased further in advance if you have space to store the bird. Frozen turkeys need to be defrosted, which can take time to do so correctly. Check to make sure you have all the equipment and ingredients needed to prepare your holiday meal including a roasting pan large enough to hold your turkey and a good food thermometer.
- ◆ **Thawing the Turkey** - Fresh and frozen turkeys are equally safe as long as they are correctly handled and stored. It is important to allow enough time for a frozen turkey to defrost. If a turkey is not properly thawed, the outside will be cooked before the inside. When this happens, the inside might not become hot enough to destroy disease-causing bacteria.



### **There are three safe ways to thaw food:**

1. Thawing in the **refrigerator**: When thawing in the refrigerator, allow approximately 24 hours per 5 pounds of turkey. A fresh turkey can remain in the refrigerator for 1-2 days.
2. Thawing in **cold water**: allow 30 minutes of defrosting per pound of turkey and change the water every 30 minutes. Changing the water keeps the turkey cold, slowing bacterial growth in the outer thawed portions while the inner areas are still thawing.
3. Thawing in the **microwave**: When using a microwave, check the manufacturer's instructions for the number of minutes per pound and the appropriate power level to use for thawing.

Recommended Turkey Thawing Times by Thawing Method			
Size of Turkey	In Refrigerator	In Cold Water	In Microwave
4 to 12 pounds	1 to 3 days	2 to 6 hours	Check manufacturer's Instructions
12 to 16 pounds	3 to 4 days	6 to 8 hours	
16 to 20 pounds	4 to 5 days	8 to 10 hours	
20 to 24 pounds	5 to 6 days	10 to 12 hours	

Continued on other side

- ◆ **Cooking** - Cook the turkey to the appropriate temperature to make sure that it is safe to eat. **Use a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of the turkey.** A whole turkey is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of **165°F** throughout the bird. Check the internal temperature on the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. All turkey meat, including any that remains pink, is safe to eat as soon as all parts reach at least 165°F. When turkey is removed from the oven, let it stand for 20 minutes. Remove stuffing and carve turkey.
  - ◆ **Stuffing** - The most reliable way to cook stuffing is separate from the turkey. If you choose to stuff the turkey, it must reach an internal temperature of 165°F before it is safe to eat. If you choose to stuff your turkey, stuff loosely about 3/4 cup of stuffing per pound of turkey. The stuffing should be moist, not dry, since heat destroys bacteria more rapidly in a moist environment. The stuffing should reach 165°F, whether cooked inside the bird or in a separate dish.

Recommended Turkey Cooking Times		
	Unstuffed Turkey	Stuffed Turkey
Size of Turkey	Hours to Prepare*	Hours to Prepare*
8 to 12 pounds	2 3/4 to 3 hours	3 to 3 1/2 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3 3/4 hours	3 1/2 to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3 3/4 to 4 1/4 hours	4 to 4 1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4 1/4 to 4 1/2 hours	4 1/4 to 4 3/4 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4 1/2 to 5 hours	4 3/4 to 5 1/4 hours
*The times listed are for a fresh or thawed turkey in an oven at 325°F		

#### ◆ Storing Leftovers

- ◆ Put all cooked and leftover foods into shallow containers and place in the refrigerator or freezer. Food left out more than two hours should be discarded.
- ◆ **Turkey:** Cut the turkey into small pieces; refrigerate stuffing and turkey separately in shallow containers within 2 hours of cooking. Use leftover turkey and stuffing within 3-4 days or freeze them. Reheat thoroughly to a temperature of 165°F.
- ◆ **Gravy** - Gravy can be refrigerated or frozen. It is important to cool the gravy promptly after the meal for storage. Refrigerated gravy must be used within 3-4 days. Flour-thickened gravy can be frozen in an airtight container up to four months. Use frozen meat and gravy combinations within 3 months.

#### Cooking Other Holiday Meals

All meats such as beef, lamb, pork, veal, and poultry should be stored in the refrigerator or freezer until prepared for eating. Cook or freeze fresh poultry within 1 to 2 days of purchase and other fresh meats within 3 to 5 days of purchase. Roast or cook meats at oven temperatures greater than 325°F. Boned and rolled meats require more cooking time per pound than bone-in cuts because it takes longer for the heat to penetrate through solid meat.

Regardless of your holiday selection, it is important to have a food thermometer on hand to make sure each meat reaches a safe internal temperature when cooking. For more information on cooking other holiday meats, visit USDA's website: [Roasting those "Other" Holiday Meats.](#)