

Turkey Tips Fact Sheets



FREEZING AND THAWING GUIDELINES FOR TURKEY

Here are food safety questions that are frequently asked when consumers are preparing turkey. The answers to these questions can help prevent foodborne illness associated with turkey. Keep these food safety guidelines in mind when handling turkey:

What foodborne bacteria are associated with turkey?

The foodborne bacteria that are most often associated with turkey are Salmonella, Campylobacter jejuni, Staphylococcus aureus, and Listeria monocytogenes.

How long can you keep a turkey in the freezer? In the refrigerator?

It is recommended that whole turkey be kept in the freezer no longer than twelve months. While there is no safety risk in holding a turkey in the freezer for longer than twelve months, the quality of the turkey may be less than desirable. Fresh whole turkeys can safely stay in the refrigerator for one to two days, or according to the date on the manufacturer's packaging.

How should I thaw my turkey? How long will it take?

There are three ways to safely thaw your turkey: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave. The most recommended way to thaw a turkey is in the refrigerator. While thawing in the refrigerator, the turkey will not reach an internal temperature above 40°F, so harmful bacteria will not have the chance to grow. Thawing a turkey in the refrigerator requires planning. If the refrigerator temperature is set at 40°F it will take about 24 hours for every 5 pounds of turkey to thaw.

If you don't have enough time to thaw the turkey in the refrigerator, you can try to thaw it in cold water. Make sure the turkey is wrapped well in leak-proof packaging, as the flesh can absorb water and make a watery product. Submerge the turkey completely in cold water. The water should be changed every thirty minutes until the turkey is completely thawed. It should take about thirty minutes per pound of turkey to thaw. Since temperature conditions are not controlled using the cold water method of thawing, the turkey should be cooked immediately after thawing.

The third method of thawing is in the microwave. You should follow the oven manufacturer's instructions for thawing turkey in the microwave. Always cook the turkey immediately after thawing in the microwave, as some parts of the turkey may have reached temperatures where harmful bacteria can grow.

Cooperative Extension Service, The University of Georgia, Athens. November, 2006.



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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT BUYING TURKEY

If turkey is at the top of your grocery list this holiday season, you may be in for a surprise when you get to the market! There is a lot to consider when purchasing just the right bird for your family feast. Here are some Q & A's that will help you make a good choice:

What is a turkey and how is it raised?

The turkey is a large, domesticated North American bird. It has white feathers and a bare head with a wattled neck.

What is the difference between a “hen” turkey and a “tom” turkey?

The distinguishing factor between a “hen” and a “tom” is the gender of the bird. The “hen” (female) is smaller than the “tom” (male), but both are equally tender.

What does it mean when a turkey is labeled “free range” or “free roaming?”

In order for a turkey to be labeled “free range” or “free roaming” the producer must be able to show the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service that the turkey has had access to the outside.

Are all turkeys inspected?

All turkeys that you buy in a retail store should be inspected by the USDA or by a state agency with equivalent standards. The inspector checks the turkey and its internal organs for signs of disease. A turkey with the label “Inspected for wholesomeness by the U.S. Department of Agriculture” means that the turkey is wholesome, has been properly labeled, and is unadulterated. Inspection is mandatory.

What does the grade on a turkey mean?

Grading is a voluntary process and it determines the quality of a turkey. Grading is based largely on the appearance of the flesh. Nearly all turkeys found in retail stores are Grade A, which is the highest quality grade.

Are there dates on turkey products?

There are no federal regulations requiring the dating of turkeys. Many processors and stores voluntarily date turkeys either with a “sell-by” date, “best if used by” date, or a “use-by” date. A “sell-by” date indicates how long the turkey should be displayed in the store. The turkey should be purchased before the “sell-by” date expires. The “best if used by” date is only a quality measure and is not related to the safety of the food. The “use-by” date indicates the last day that the turkey should be used. This is also a quality measure and not necessarily an indication of safety.

Are there labeling requirements on turkeys?

All raw or partially cooked turkeys are required by the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service must have safe handling instructions on the packaging. Nutrition labeling is required for most multi-ingredient turkey products.

What does the “fresh” or “frozen” label mean?

Turkeys that are labeled “fresh” are birds that have never been below 26°F. “Frozen” or “previously frozen” turkeys have been held at or below 0°F.



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SAFELY COOKING THE HOLIDAY TURKEY

After safely thawing the holiday turkey, the time arrives to begin cooking the turkey in anticipation of a meal to remember. Just be aware that the people who eat your meal do not want to remember it as a holiday of foodborne illness! Here's how to properly cook the turkey so that your guests will have fond recollections of the holiday season.

Begin with the correct oven temperature set no lower than 325 ° F, preheating is not necessary. Place the turkey on a rack in a shallow roasting pan large enough to hold the turkey and a meat thermometer. For food safety and uniform doneness of the turkey, cook stuffing separately in a casserole dish. Use a food thermometer to check that the internal temperature of the stuffing has reached 165 ° F in the middle, thickest part.

Now the question that everyone wants answered "is it done yet"? Even if the turkey has a "pop up" temperature indicator, it is also recommended that a food thermometer be used to test in several places. Whole poultry is safe when cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 165°F as measured with a food thermometer. Check the internal temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. For reasons of personal preference, it is still best to cook turkey to higher temperatures such as 180° F to remove pink appearance and rubbery texture.

Many factors can affect the roasting time of a whole turkey. A frozen or partially frozen turkey takes longer to cook than a completely thawed turkey. And, a turkey will cook faster in a dark roasting pan. The use of a foil tent for the entire cooking time can actually slow cooking. Putting a lid on the roasting pan speeds up cooking and an oven-cooking bag will shorten cooking time.

A fresh or thawed 12 to 14 pound turkey will take approximately 3 to 3 1/2 hours to cook at 325° F. Cooking charts give times for judging cooking times of different sizes of turkeys, however, the only way to accurately determine doneness is by using a thermometer. Remember when the turkey is removed from the oven, let it stand for 20 minutes.

You've almost made it to the finish line! Don't make the mistake of cross-contaminating the cooked turkey. Be sure to carve the bird with a clean knife using clean hands on a clean work surface wearing a clean apron, placing the finished product on a clean serving plate. The key word for food safety is clean! Now, it's time to relax and make fond memories of a safe holiday meal with family and friends.

