

Having a Healthy Holiday: Safely Thawing a Turkey

There are several ways of thawing a turkey for your Thanksgiving meal. Thawing in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave are the methods suggested most by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). In terms of food safety and proper thawing habits, it is best to thaw turkey in the refrigerator to prevent bacterial growth. The slow thawing of frozen foods allows for minimum growth of bacteria, which can cause foodborne illness. Approximately 1 in 6 people become infected with a foodborne illness each year. These illnesses have flu-like symptoms, and can make the holidays difficult to enjoy.

Thawing in the Refrigerator

Refrigerator thawing takes time. The USDA recommends allowing 24 hours for each 4-5 pounds in a refrigerator with a temperature set at 40°F or lower. The following graph shows thawing times for turkeys of various weights. Once the turkey is thawed, it can be left in the refrigerator for 1-2 days before cooking.

Size of Turkey	Thawing Time in Refrigerator
4-12 pounds	1-3 days
12-16 pounds	3-4 days
16-20 pounds	4-5 days
20-24 pounds	5-6 days

The turkey stored in the refrigerator should be kept in its original sealed packaging until thawing is complete. It should be placed in a shallow container on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator to keep juices which could be full of bacteria from dripping on and contaminating other foods.

Thawing in Cold Water

Cold water thawing of a frozen turkey is a quicker process than in the refrigerator, but takes time. In addition to being in its original packaging, the turkey should be put in a leak-proof plastic bag to prevent cross-contamination and absorption of water. Cold water thawing should be done in the kitchen sink, not in the bath tub. If the kitchen sink is not of sufficient size, then another method of thawing should

be done. Fill the sink with cold water, and submerge the turkey in the water. The water should be changed every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed. The following table shows cold water method thawing times. Changing of the water is done to prevent possible bacteria growth. Once the turkey is defrosted in water, it must be cooked immediately.

Size of Turkey	Thawing Time in Cold Water
4-12 pounds	2-6 hours
12-16 pounds	6-8 hours
16-20 pounds	8-10 hours
20-24 pounds	10-12 hours

Cold water thawing, while faster, requires much more preparation than refrigerator thawing. Water needs to be changed every 30 minutes for every pound the turkey weighs, which can be an inconvenience at such a busy time. The potential for cross-contamination is also much greater. The plastic bag could potentially leak and contaminate the water used to thaw. This water could be splashed on kitchen items or even food that is meant for consumption.

Thawing in the Microwave

This thawing method requires a turkey that is small enough to fit in a microwave. Remove all packaging from the turkey and place in a microwave-safe container to catch juices that may leak. Using the defrost setting, follow the instruction manual for the minutes per pound it needs to be thawed. Once thawed, it needs to be cooked immediately as some of the areas of the turkey will already be cooked from defrosting. It is not recommended to store partially cooked food since it allows for bacteria growth.

Following these practices are efficient ways to prevent and avoid foodborne illness, however thawing your turkey in the refrigerator is the best way to prevent foodborne illness and cross-contamination. It is important to follow proper food safety rules at all times. Make this Thanksgiving holiday memorable for all the right reasons!



Adapted from the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service

Educational programs of the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, religion, national origin, age, disability, genetic information or veteran status.