

Purchasing the Turkey

Fresh or frozen? There is no quality difference between a fresh or frozen turkey although fresh turkeys have shorter shelf lives. By purchasing a frozen turkey, you can get the turkey in advance and take advantage of special sales. Fresh turkeys provide convenience because they do not require thawing.

When purchasing a whole turkey, purchase at least one pound of uncooked turkey per person. You'll have enough for the feast and for leftovers too. Keep in mind that a whole turkey takes about 24 hours per four to five pounds to thaw in the refrigerator. (For example: A 15-pound frozen bird will take 3 to 4 full days to thaw in the refrigerator.) Ideally, purchase your frozen turkey as far in advance as necessary to safely thaw it in the refrigerator. If buying a fresh turkey, purchase it only 1 to 2 days before the meal and keep it refrigerated.

Thawing and Handling

Always wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling the turkey.

Never defrost turkey on the counter! Turkey can be thawed in the refrigerator or in cold water. The refrigerator method is the safest and will result in the best finished product. Leave the bird in the original packaging and place in a shallow pan and allow refrigerator thawing time at a rate of 4 to 5 pounds per 24 hours. To thaw in cold water, keep turkey in the original packaging, place in a clean and sanitized sink or pan and submerge in cold water. Change the cold water every 30 minutes. The turkey will take about 30 minutes per pound to thaw. Cook the turkey immediately after it is thawed. Do not refreeze. Once thawed, remove neck and giblets from the body cavities and keep bird and parts (if using) refrigerated at 40 °F or below until it is ready to be cooked.

Cooking Time and Temperature

There are several methods for cooking your turkey. The single most important thing to know, no matter the cooking method, is that the turkey must be cooked to the proper internal temperature as measured with a food thermometer. A stuffed turkey will take additional time to cook.

Stuffing should be prepared and stuffed into the turkey immediately before it's placed in the oven. Mix the wet and dry ingredients for the stuffing separately and combine just before using. Stuff the turkey loosely, about 3/4 cup stuffing per pound of turkey. Bake any extra stuffing in a greased casserole dish. Cooked inside or outside the bird, all stuffing and dressing recipes must be cooked to a minimum temperature of 165 °F. (For optimum safety and more even cooking, it's recommended to cook your stuffing in a casserole dish.)

Take the temperature! Insert a meat thermometer into the thickest part of the thigh, not touching bone. Cook 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, cook turkey to higher temperatures but not to exceed 170 °F in the breast and 180 °F in the thigh. (If the turkey is done and the stuffing is not yet 165 °F, remove the stuffing from the turkey and place it in a greased casserole dish to continue cooking to temperature.) Use the timetable below to estimate approximate cooking time.

Thermal/Conventional Oven Open Pan Method Timetable for Roasting a Turkey at 325 °F.

Unstuffed Turkey	
8 to 12 pounds	2-3/4 to 3 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3 to 3-3/4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	3-3/4 to 4-1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4-1/4 to 4-1/2 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4-1/2 to 5 hours
Stuffed Turkey	
8 to 12 pounds	3 to 3-1/2 hours
12 to 14 pounds	3-1/2 to 4 hours
14 to 18 pounds	4 to 4-1/4 hours
18 to 20 pounds	4-1/4 to 4-3/4 hours
20 to 24 pounds	4-3/4 to 5-1/4 hours

Convection Oven Open Pan Method Roasting Guidelines for a Fresh/Thawed Turkey at 300 °F.

Unstuffed Turkey	
14 to 18 pounds	2-1/2 to 3-1/4 hours
18 to 22 pounds	3-1/4 to 3-1/2 hours
Stuffed Turkey	
14 to 18 pounds	3 to 3-1/4 hours
18 to 22 pounds	3-1/4 to 3-3/4 hours

Safe Carving and Serving

It's best to let the turkey rest for 20 minutes before carving to allow the juices to set, so the turkey will carve more easily. Use a clean cutting board that has a well to catch juices. Remove all stuffing from the turkey cavity. Make sure your knife is sharp before you start carving. Do not leave any extra turkey, stuffing or other leftovers out for more than two hours.

Storing Leftovers Safely

Remove the stuffing and carve the extra turkey meat from the bones. Within two hours, store leftover turkey in shallow containers and put in the refrigerator or the freezer. Use cooked leftover turkey, stuffing and gravy within 3-4 days. Cooked turkey keeps for 3-4 months in the freezer. When using leftovers, reheat the foods thoroughly to 165 °F or until hot and steaming; bring gravy to a boil before serving.

Limits on Leftovers

Having leftover turkey and other dishes means you can have additional tasty meals the day after your feast. But there are limits on how long you can safely keep leftovers.

Temperature and time cause bacteria to grow, which is why it is so important your refrigerator be cold enough and you not keep leftovers too long.

Even when refrigerated properly (at 40 °F), leftovers should be eaten, frozen or discarded within 3 to 4 days.

When heating and storing leftovers keep the following in mind:

- Refrigerate cooked leftovers promptly - within 2 hours. Use an appliance thermometer in your refrigerator to ensure your refrigerator is at 40 °F or below.
- Divide leftovers into smaller portions and store in shallow containers in the refrigerator.
- Wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling food.
- Reheat cooked leftovers to 165 °F as measured with a food thermometer. Sauces, soups and gravies should be reheated by bringing them to a boil.
- When microwaving leftovers, make sure there are no cold spots in food (where bacteria can survive). Cover food, stir and rotate for even cooking.

Cold Storage Guidelines for Some Holiday Foods

Product	Refrigerator (40 °F)	Freezer (0 °F)
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Fresh Eggs, in shell	3 to 5 week	Do not freeze
Soups & Stews-vegetable or meat added	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 months
Fresh turkey, whole	1 to 2 days	1 year
Fresh turkey, pieces	1 to 2 days	9 months
Giblets	1 to 2 days	3 to 4 months
Cooked meat & meat casseroles	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 months
Vegetable Casseroles	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 months
Gravy & meat broth	3 to 4 days	2 to 3 months
Cooked poultry casseroles	3 to 4 days	4 to 6 months
Stuffing, cooked	3 to 4 days	1 month

U.S. Food and Drug Administration

1-888-SAFEFOOD: For questions about safe handling of the many foods that go into a delicious holiday meal, including eggs, dairy, fresh produce and seafood.

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1-888-MPHOTLINE (1-888-674-6854). M-F, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. EST.

Open Thanksgiving Day, 8 a.m. – 2 p.m. EST. E-mail questions to the hotline at www.mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov or ask a food safety question at AskKaren.gov.

This article is provided by www.holidayfoodsafety.org. For more information, please feel free to the Texas A & M AgriLife Extension Service office at 903-473-4580 or visit us at rains.agrilife.org.