



As we prepare for feasting on Thanksgiving Day, we look forward to the golden roasted turkey coming out of the oven. But we don't look forward to possible Salmonella poisoning. Turkey, if not properly prepared, may have foodborne illness-causing disease organisms present, such as Salmonella, Campylobacter, Staphylococcus, and Listeria. Knowing a few food safety basics when handling turkey will ease your fears and bring you a safe and delicious turkey meal for the holidays.



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**Reference:**

*Food Safety Facts. 2019. Turkey Basics: Safe Thawing; Safe Cooking; Stuffing; Handling Precooked Dinners. USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service.*

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# Thanksgiving Food Safety

*By Jian Yang, Ph.D.*



## Storage before cooking

If purchasing a frozen turkey, be sure to make space in your freezer for an 8 to 24 lb. turkey before going to the store. When you arrive home with the turkey, place it immediately in the freezer until ready to use. If you plan to purchase a fresh turkey, it can be safely kept in the refrigerator at 40°F or less for 1-2 days.

## Thawing

The following three methods can be used to safely thaw food: in the refrigerator, in cold water, and in the microwave oven. Thawing on the counter longer than 2 hours is not safe.

**Refrigerator:** Ensure fridge is 40°F or less. Allow approximately 24 hours of thawing time for every 5 pounds of turkey.

**Cold water:** Be sure the turkey is in leak-proof packaging so it won't absorb water, and submerge it in cold water. Change the water every 30 minutes. Allow 30 minutes of thawing time for every pound of turkey. Cook immediately upon thawing.

**Microwave:** Follow the manufacturer's instructions, and plan to cook the turkey immediately after thawing.

## Cooking

Cooking is the only way to destroy harmful bacteria in turkey. The oven temperature must be at least 325°F. Use a food thermometer to ensure

the turkey reaches a safe internal temperature of at least 165°F. Check the temperature in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and in the thickest part of the breast.

Cooking a stuffed turkey is more risky because harmful bacteria can survive in stuffing and result in foodborne illness. A food thermometer must be used to check the center of the stuffing until the temperature of the stuffing reaches 165°F. For increased safety and uniform doneness, cook the stuffing separately in a casserole. Buying a stuffed turkey without the USDA or state mark inspection is not recommended.

## Stuffing preparation

Keep wet and dry stuffing ingredients separate in the refrigerator and mix just before filling. The mixed ingredients should be moist and stuffed loosely, as heat destroys bacteria rapidly in a moist environment. Cook the turkey immediately after stuffing. After cooking, let the turkey stand for 20 minutes to set juices and let the temperature of the stuffing continuously rise. Then immediately remove all the stuffing.

## Leftovers

Perishable foods should not be left out of the refrigerator or oven for more than 2 hours. Cut turkey leftovers into small pieces and refrigerate in shallow containers separately from the stuffing.

Use leftover turkey and stuffing within 3-4 days and leftover gravy within 1-2 days, or freeze these foods. If reheated, heat turkey pieces thoroughly to 165°F. It is safe to refreeze leftover turkey and trimmings even if they were previously frozen.

## Precooked dinners

If your precooked turkey dinner is hot, keep it hot. Set your oven's temperature high enough to keep the internal temperature of the turkey and side dishes at 140°F or above, and eat the dinner within 2 hours of pickup. If you do not eat the dinner within 2 hours, remove all stuffing from the turkey cavity immediately and refrigerate the dinner in shallow containers.

If your precooked turkey dinner is cold, keep it cold. Refrigerate as soon as possible, always within 2 hours. Serve within 1-2 days. Turkey may be eaten cold.

## Reheating

Reheating a whole turkey is not recommended. To reheat, slice breast meat (legs and wings may be left whole), and heat turkey pieces and side dishes thoroughly to 165°F. Bring gravy to a rolling boil.

### Estimated thawing time for a whole turkey

Turkey weight	In refrigerator	In cold water
4 to 12 lbs.	1 to 3 days	2 to 6 hours
12 to 16 lbs.	3 to 4 days	6 to 8 hours
16 to 20 lbs.	4 to 5 days	8 to 10 hours
20 to 24 lbs.	5 to 6 days	10 to 12 hours

### Approximate cooking time for a whole turkey

Turkey weight	Unstuffed	Stuffed
8 to 12 lbs.	2 ¾ - 3 hours	3 - 3 ½ hours
12 to 14 lbs.	3 - 3 ¾ hours	3 ½ - 4 hours
14 to 18 lbs.	3 ¾ - 4 ¼ hours	4 - 4 ¼ hours
18 to 20 lbs.	4 ¼ - 4 ½ hours	4 ¼ - 4 ¾ hours
20 to 24 lbs.	4 ¼ - 5 hours	4 ¾ - 5 ¼ hours

*Times are based on fresh or completely thawed turkey at a refrigerator temperature of 40°F or below. These cooking times are guidelines only. Use a food thermometer to determine safe doneness.*

### 4 Rules for a Safe Turkey Dinner

1. Avoid the temperature "danger zone" between 40° and 140°F, where harmful bacteria can multiply rapidly.
2. Use a food thermometer to ensure foods are fully cooked to 165°F.
3. Wash hands for 20 seconds in hot, soapy water before and after contact with raw turkey.
4. Separate raw turkey from foods that will not be cooked, such as salads and breads, to avoid contamination with harmful bacteria in raw turkey meat and juices.